

Social class determines how the unemployed talk about food insecurity

September 14 2018, by Jeff Sossamon



A representation of unemployment photograph of the interior of the participant's (Cherry Blossom) home refrigerator. Credit: "Cherry Blossom" (pseudonym), 2012

"Cherry Blossom," a 39-year-old woman worked as a hotel breakfast bar hostess around the start of the "Great Recession." She lost her job, and three years later she was being interviewed to assess her struggles with her unemployment. She talked about her empty refrigerator.

A study by University of Missouri researchers that began as a survey of [unemployment](#) following the recession, led researchers to discover that participants used [food](#) to describe their circumstances.

In lower classes, those surveyed tended to think about food as survival; they experienced food [insecurity](#), but rarely asked for food from family because of perceived stigmas. People from the middle classes tended to use language to "blur" their relationship with food, making it challenging for the listener to know if they were experiencing food insecurity. As a result, they were unlikely to gain access to [food resources](#) to address food insecurity.

However, people interviewed in the upper classes talked about food as a networking tool, rarely considering its physical necessity. Researchers believe that, given that food insecurity crosses social class boundaries during economic downturns, and given the variety of differing responses to food insecurity, policymakers should consider all demographics and socio-economic backgrounds when forming policies that affect food insecurity.

"Food is the essence of social [class](#)—the way we talk about it, the way we think about it," said Debbie Dougherty, professor of communication in the MU College of Arts and Science. "We usually think about hunger as something that's purely material, we also need to think about hunger as something communicative. Food discourses are embedded into the U.S. culture and can reveal social and cultural capital. Our study revealed ways in which the food narrative shows the lived experiences of those experiencing unemployment."

Using a method called Photovoice, researchers asked participants to take photos of their experiences to help explain and illustrate their unemployment. Those surveyed tend to become more active in the research process, and their photos offer another source of data.

The data were collected between 2012 and 2013, and participants were chosen from various demographic and socio-economic backgrounds. In their responses, 19 of 21 participants voluntarily spoke about food and food access. Several in lower and middle classes submitted photos of empty or barely stocked refrigerators, other talked of how difficult it could be to obtain food.

"What was surprising was those who were in the upper classes were good at obscuring their 'food drama,'" Dougherty said. "The privilege this group of people previously had—that they thought of food only as a social or work function—made it so that they didn't have to think about their lack of food—they tended to maintain the fantasy of their lives by taking their laptops to the coffee shop and feigning work. Surprisingly, these are the people who get lost in the shuffle in the discussion of food insecurity."

Dougherty says that policymakers tend to think about food in regions—as a geographically related problem. Dougherty and her team suggest that policymakers at local, state and national levels should be addressing [food insecurity](#) as a more diffused problem that encompasses different classes and different neighborhoods in our towns and cities.

"Our economy generally runs in 8 to 10-year cycles, so when we have an economic downturn, we need to be thinking more widely about distribution of food as opposed to thinking about it in these geographically narrow spaces," Dougherty said.

The study, "A Photovoice study of food (in)security, unemployment, and the discursive-material dialectic," was published in *Communication Monographs*.

More information: Debbie S. Dougherty et al, A Photovoice study of food (in)security, unemployment, and the discursive-material dialectic,

Communication Monographs (2018). DOI:
[10.1080/03637751.2018.1500700](https://doi.org/10.1080/03637751.2018.1500700)

Provided by University of Missouri-Columbia

Citation: Social class determines how the unemployed talk about food insecurity (2018, September 14) retrieved 19 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2018-09-social-class-unemployed-food-insecurity.html>

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