

Gathering Stories and Experiences
About Food Security and Nutritional Health
from Immigrants and Refugees Settling in Canada

Group 24

Executive Summary

We are a group of six students from various disciplines in the faculty of Land and Food Systems at UBC. This semester, we got the opportunity to collaborate with Immigrant Services Society of BC (ISSofBC) to obtain a better understanding of the needs and perspective of newcomers with regards to food, nutrition, and food security. Our partner, ISSofBC, is a government-funded, nonprofit agency that provides support services for immigrants and refugees to help them successfully integrate. Specifically for our project, we wish to collect stories from newcomers regarding their past and present food experiences and then analyze the information we obtain. This information will then be forwarded to ISSofBC to facilitate their development of future programs or workshops for newcomers. By completing our project, we hope to answer the following questions: what was newcomers' diet in their homeland and do they have access to those foods in Vancouver? Do they consider their diet in Vancouver nutritionally adequate and how does it compare to their diet in their homeland? Did they experience any food insecurity back in their homeland and did that change when they arrived in Canada? To answer these questions, we interviewed ISSofBC's clients in two focus groups on separate occasions, each of which involves participants from different cultures (Afghan and Chinese). We recorded the responses in interviews by taking detailed notes. Then, we organized this information and qualitatively analyzed it by listing some of the main themes that stood out in each focus group and compare and contrast them. The results showed that, in general, newcomers were able to get all the food they need and the quality of food were comparable to what they get in their homeland. However, some participants did show concerns of price and the availability of culturally specific food. Due to time limit for this project, we only got data from two cultural groups, so the information might not be applicable for all newcomers that engage with ISSofBC. Thus, we recommend ISSofBC to conduct more interviews based on our model so that more data can be collected to create a fuller picture regarding the barriers that refugees and immigrants encounter. By having a stronger data, they will be able to generate resources or workshops regarding food and nutrition that are applicable to more newcomers.

Introduction

In 2011, Canada had an immigrant population of about 6,775,800 people, which represented 20.6% of the total population (Health Canada, 2009). Immigrants are considered more vulnerable to food insecurity as result of poverty, low-wage employment, job insecurity, language, education, and marginal social position (Quandt et al., 2006). According to Health Canada, the prevalence of household food insecurity was higher among recent immigrant households(12.6%) compared to non-immigrant households (7.5%) and non-recent immigrant households (7.8%) (2012).

Quite a few studies have addressed the food insecurity problems confronting immigrants. However, data on what exactly newcomers experience when they move to Canada is far from enough, which makes it difficult to improve their food and nutrition situation. Based on these, we find it of great importance to do a project to collect data on newcomers' food experiences so that government and relevant agencies can use them as resources to develop strategies and run workshops to help improve the newcomers' food and nutrition conditions in the future.

We chose ISSofBC's project because we share the common goal. ISSofBC is a not-for-profit immigrant serving agency in BC and one of the largest multicultural immigrant serving agencies in Canada. It provides over 30,000 immigrants and refugees annually with a wide range of services, including settlement, language classes, employment services as well as community connections, to help them build a future in Canada.

The objectives of the project are to collect stories of the newcomers' previous and current food experiences through interviews in focus groups with possible recording, to analyze collected and interpret data through group discussion, and to report findings and interviewing experience for ISSofBC's future strategy developing and workshops.

By completion of the project, we hope to answer some, if not all of these questions below:

- What was their diet in their homeland? What is the accessibility of these foods in Vancouver? Are these foods available at all?
- Do they consider their diet in Vancouver nutritionally adequate? How does this diet compare to their diet in their homeland.
- Did they experience any food insecurity in their homeland? How did the insecurity/security transition when they arrived in Canada?

Methods

i) Data collection approach

Data was collected by conducting 2 newcomer focus groups, with the help of our community partner, the ISSofBC, and interviewing participants using a set of questions regarding their immigration and nutrition stories and experiences. These immigration and nutrition stories of the newcomers would help us identify any transitional and cultural issues the immigrants face, especially with regards to their nutritional needs and food security, and help facilitate a smoother and more positive integration into their new Western society and culture in Canada. Expressed consent was derived from the participants prior to conducting the focus group interviews. The focus groups were selected based on variation in nationalities and culture to gain a difference in perspective from each group. The same questions were asked of both the Afghan senior women focus group and the mixed Chinese focus groups. Teams of 2 UBC students interviewed 3 Afghani focus groups, and teams of 3 UBC students interviewed 2 Chinese focus groups, determined by the number of participants enrolled per focus group. There were translators present in every focus group to assist with translating our questions to the participants, and translating back responses from the participants, for accuracy of recording and note-taking. The responses from both focus groups' interview questions were noted and recorded on paper or computer by each group of UBC students.

ii) Procedures & Analysis

The combined responses from both the focus groups interviews and from within the different teams of UBC student focus groups was gathered and summarized. The responses of the Afghans and Chinese focus groups were compared and contrasted to distinguish any similarities or differences that were expressed to us by each of the focus groups, with regards to their nutrition and food security, and to identify any gaps that may be present in their nutrition needs and food security, that were voiced to us by the focus groups participants. These data were interpreted through group discussions with the newcomers and within our team members.

iii) Ethical considerations

At every stage of our focus group interviews we were cognizant of the vulnerability of the newcomers. We were well aware that they were sharing their immigration, nutrition and food security stories with us from a very trusting standpoint, and we afforded to them our

complete compassion, patience and empathy. We allowed them the discretion to answer the questions they felt comfortable with, and which were within the ethical framework, and to inform us of anything that they were uncomfortable with. We were fully understanding of their differences in culture, language and dietary patterns, and engaged with them with an open mind, and in complete confidence. In doing so, we hoped to create a safe space for the newcomers to share their immigration and nutrition stories and experiences wholeheartedly, which would be used for the future benefit of newcomers immigrating to Canada.

Below is our questionnaire:

UBC LFS 350 FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONNAIRE – FOR ISS <i>of</i> BC FOCUS GROUPS
<i>1. Where are you from? What were some staple foods in your region? What are some common meals you ate back home?</i>
<i>2. Where and how did you acquire or purchase your food in your hometown? Did you have a garden/grow your own food, go to farms, streets or open air markets, or larger retail markets?</i>
<i>3. What are some of your favourite memories of food in your hometown?</i>
<i>4. What are some of your favourite foods that you have liked in Canada? Any surprises or main differences?</i>
<i>5. What were your first impressions of going shopping for food in Canada? How did it compare to shopping for food in your homeland – e.g. the size of the supermarkets/the variety/the availability of various different foods/ the cost of food? Did you find it affordable or expensive?</i>
<i>6. Overall, how does your experience of obtaining food in Canada compare to your experience of obtaining food in your homeland?</i>
<i>7. How would you describe your food security in your homeland? In Canada? Would you consider yourself food secure and having full access to the foods of your choice? Or did you encounter barriers to accessing healthy, nutritious food for your families – If so, what were/are these barriers to your food security? (cost, location, transportation, cultural?)</i>
<i>8. Are there any standards of healthy eating set by the Government in your homeland? If so, how is this information communicated to the people? (food guide/pamphlets/tv infomercials?)</i>

Results

The staple foods in the participants' homeland as well as the common meals the participants used to consume before immigration were the first things we were interested in. As is shown in Table 1, the diets of both groups had very obvious cultural characteristics.

Table 1. Staple foods and common meals in home country

	Afghani	Chinese
Staple foods	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Rice● Beans● Vegetables● Meat	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Rice● Noodles
Common meals	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Halim (a meat dish)● Halwa (a sweet dish)● Pilafs (consists of rice, beans, meat and potatoes)● Afghan naan● Homemade bread and cookies● Fruit (as dessert)● Chai (tea)● Dry meat (in winter)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Green vegetables● Tomatoes● Fruits● Potatoes and cabbages (North Eastern China, in winter)● Snakes, insects (Southern China)

We then moved on to the food acquisition methods of the Afghan and the Chinese participants. As is illustrated in Figure 1, most Afghan families grew their own foods, and sold their extra produce door-to-door or in open markets. This resulted in very limited need for them to buy foods from retail stores. Due to a lack of electricity, food was eaten the same day of acquiring. In comparison, as is shown in Figure 2, the Chinese participants had a variety of methods to acquire foods. Most of them bought food in megastores once or twice per week, some shopped for food every day from farmer's markets in the neighborhood

where foods were cheaper and fresher, and some people also preferred ordering food from the grocery stores where food delivery service was available. Other food sources include urban farms, milkman, etc.

Figure 1. Distribution of food acquisition methods in Afghanistan

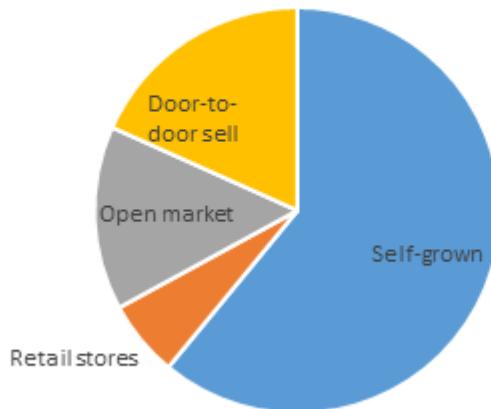
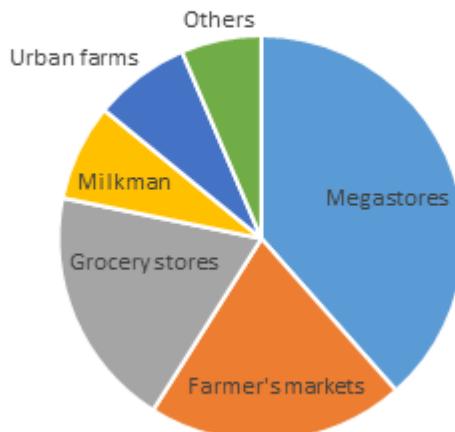


Figure 2. Distribution of food acquisition methods in China



We also asked our participants to evaluate their food security before immigration. All the Chinese respondents felt very food-secured in China, because a variety of foods were easily accessible. The only barrier they found was about the safety standards of foods. The seniors in the Afghan focus group also reported being food-secured in their homeland, since

foods like fruits, vegetables, crops, eggs and dairy products were in abundance. However, their accessibility to meat depended on the household income.

We then asked our participants to compare their food shopping experience here in Metro Vancouver with that in their home country, in terms of the size of supermarkets and the attributes of foods. The most significant findings are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2. Major changes in food shopping experiences after immigration

	Afghani	Chinese
Positive	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Bigger supermarkets ● Availability of different cultural foods 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Higher variety of foods ● Healthier ● Cheaper fruits, seafood and meat
Negative	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● High price of foods ● Difficulty in finding halal meat products ● Less sweet fruits 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Higher price of vegetables ● Tasteless milk

Next, we looked for their major barriers to obtaining foods in Canada. Table 3 shows what we have found. Most of the information was obtained in our focus group studies. Besides, the coordinators for the Afghan focus group from ISSofBC also provided some valuable information.

Table 3. Barriers to food acquisition

Afghani	Chinese
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Difficulty in finding halal meat ● Unable to know the source of gelatin in poorly-labeled foods 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Lack of freshly-slaughtered poultry

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Long travel distance to big superstores • High price of foods 	
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Finally, the ways in which food and nutritional knowledge was communicated to the participants before and after their immigration into Canada were learned. The results are summarized in Table 4.

Table 4. Means of nutritional information acquisition before and after immigration

	Afghani	Chinese
Before Immigration	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • From family generation to generation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • From family generation to generation • Through television infomercials • Government funded programs
After Immigration	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Through health clinics • Through community centers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ESL schools

Discussion

Our data identifies the food consumption patterns of Afghan and Chinese immigrants; while this data arrives from a sample, we can analyze it as a microcosm for the experience of newcomers to Canada.

Food security and food sovereignty are concerns in the global agri-food system. Individuals have the right to adequate, nutritional, and culturally appropriate foods. This right outweighs the salience of borders. Hence, when an immigrant arrives in Canada, they should have the opportunity to duplicate their food consumption habits. Canada has a responsibility to assure food security and food sovereignty to immigrants. Hence, food from different cultures needs to be supplied within grocery stores in order to accommodate newcomers.

Patterns of their food literacy illustrates the importance of generations. Knowledge and customs, surrounding food, are transmitted from generation to generation. However,

since arriving in Canada, the role of the family has diminished since children learn food literacy mostly in schools.

Both Afghans and Chinese agreed that their food security has improved since arriving in Canada. Despite their food security, their complaints focused on a lack of arable land on which to cultivate their own food as many had done in Afghanistan and China respectively. Nutritionally, they are pleased over the wider selection of foods in grocery stores.

However, this accessibility overlooks cultural sensitivity. For example, the Afghans illustrated a religious barrier in acquiring protein. Halal meat is difficult to find and expensive. Moreover, many packaged products do not list whether the gelatin used is derived from pork - if so, then they could not consume that product. Hence, a gap between consumer and producer exists. The difficulty in acquiring halal meat illustrates a barrier to food security for certain cultures in Vancouver. The situation of the Afghans is a microcosm for others in Vancouver. This barrier reflects the inadequacies of our local food system in guaranteeing food sovereignty.

The Chinese felt extremely capable of exercising their food sovereignty; duplicating their Chinese meals was not difficult. Therefore, both cultures attempt to duplicate their native diets in a new country. This attempt to maintain their native diets illustrates the value they attribute to culture. Maintaining culture is a right; the results demonstrate immigrants practicing food sovereignty.

Despite the ability to increase our knowledge, this method contains limitations. Discussions in focus groups were highly dependent on participants' language ability and the accuracy of interpreters. The unevenness in participants' activeness is another limitation of this focus group study. Some members were talkative; others tended to stay quiet. Despite our efforts to elicit participation out of quieter members, their responses were shy and short. Hence, the answers we received were not as diverse as we had hoped; while our results demonstrate diversity, they could have been more dimensional had a larger percentage of members participated. The information we received could be an oversimplification because of the lack of multiple perspectives in our conversations.

Another limitation is people's hesitation to reveal their dietary patterns because they worry about negatively reflecting on their socio-economic position - especially with strangers. Within the Afghan group, the majority are refugees rather than immigrants; hence, their socio-economic backgrounds are more or less similar. In contrast, participants in the Chinese group were all immigrants with distinct socio-economic backgrounds. Coaxing individuals to discuss a sensitive issue is impolite and we respected their reticence.

Conclusion

This project demonstrated the necessity of understanding issues related to food security for various ethnic groups. These issues consist of food availability, and nutritional education. This project illustrated possible directions future efforts could take, such as the consideration of ethnicity-dependent needs.

The interview model, including refined questions, agenda, and tips, could be duplicated in the future. Newcomers' food and nutritional concerns, could be highly useful for ISSofBC in helping their clients with their food acquisition - such as the soon to arrive Syrian refugees.

The practice of interview and data analysis yields quite a few specific results within and beyond our prediction, partially due to the limit information our LFS students could get and also the unique environment in Metro Vancouver. These food security related issues and concerns arisen during the interview, such as food supply involving religious requirement and the difficulty in transformation of food acquiring methods, indicate the challenging objectives of the whole society involved in the food system of Metro Vancouver.

Due to limited time to interview immigrants, some questions were not well answered. For example, one group of Afghan seniors refused to comment on their food security experience and expectation - possibly due to religious reasons. Besides, the highly concerned issue of balancing the food price and individual's expectation is one part that we felt relatively challenging to deal with.

In the future, more efforts might be put into two directions. One is the developing/revising of new food guide based on ethnic groups' unique diet in their own language, which may come from the academic/government side; the other is the community-based/business part, such as organizing more farms market and improve food supply of special needs. International nutrition major students and alumni of LFS who are currently or have worked in the food industry or as retailers could cooperate, possibly with help from

sociology, business, and language study professors and students to achieve the goals of promising a future of food security for newcomers to Canada.

Critical Reflections

“C”

Overall I enjoyed my experience in this project. I really value this opportunity to be able to work with members of our local community through the project, because it is not something that is available in every course. I do have to admit that there were some challenging times during the process. For example, we were having difficulties scheduling time to meet with our community partner and for our focus groups since we all have a really tight schedule. Our availability often does not fit with our community partner’s. After a lot of communication and consideration, several of our group members decided to sacrifice some of their lecture times in other courses to make our visits to the community possible. Problems like these only arose when we were actually conducting our project, and it is not always predictable. Though we have struggled due to these uncertainties, I still enjoyed the whole experience because we got to feel what it is like to encounter and solve problems in the real world, instead of just thinking about theories. I think this is the essence of community based experiential learning. Lastly, I believe I will be benefited in the future because I will have more confidence to work around the problem if I encounter similar situations.

“M”

This project is really a unique experience to me, especially the face to face communication with Afghan refugees which is really meaningful and impressive. It breaks the incorrect understandings about the food and culture of Afghan people base on imagination and provides me the chance to seek the clue of the true concerns of them about their diet in Canada. Also, the second focus group discussion, involving new immigrants from China and west Asia, also broad my view quite a bit because I did not know how diverse the food resource could be, such as eggs of insects. Overall, this community based experiential learning brings me very specific experience of how we can apply our knowledge learnt in

class to some practical issues instead of keep it abstract and theoretical. I believe that only by staying in the environment where the issues arise, can we really stop just discuss those systematic theories and help deal with specific problems in the food system of Metro Vancouver. I enjoyed the most part of this learning and I have learnt the methods to overcome some unexpected difficulties and to promote the smooth proceeding of team works.

“A”

We have conducted several food projects in the past, in which we provided our cooperators or participants with professional knowledge, skills or techniques. But this project showed us a different approach to address a food issue. Instead of telling others what to do, this time we listened to them. By listening to the immigrants’ telling their food stories, we involved ourselves into their situations, rather than being an outsider; we could stand on their position, gaining a thorough understanding of their real food and nutritional needs, and learning about their own potentials in solving the food issues that they were confronted with. For example, if we did not listen to the immigrants’ stories, we would not know the Chinese immigrants looked for live poultry in the market, as well, we would not know the Afghan immigrants’ need for proper labelling of the gelatin-containing food products. If no attention was paid to, the neglected problems would never have a chance to be treated.

“Z”

This course, LFS 350, allowed for a lot of community interaction and real-world community based experiential learning (CBEL) project work, with an actual community partner, which was the highlight of this course. The opportunity for flexible learning outside the classroom walls was refreshing and educational. Setting up meetings with the community partner, meeting at different locations, meeting with people in the community –immigrant newcomers - for project work, and conducting focus groups with the newcomers provided great exposure and real-world learning experience over and above classroom lectures and tutorials. It imparted to us great responsibility and accountability to carry out this project and to report to the community partner regarding our focus group interviews and information synthesis. Interacting and collaborating with the community partner and members in the community – actively listening and engaging with newcomers regarding their stories and experiences of immigration, nutrition and food security - was both exciting and effective compared to the mundane learning environment of the university setting. On-line and personal phone interactions with the community partner were also very efficient and enhanced the team spirit,

providing a supportive and transparent learning environment, towards the achievement of a common goal. One of the challenges of such a flexible learning environment and group work at task is the relative participation and dedication of team members to the team effort. This can affect the dynamics of the group affecting the outcome of the group project. With these types of CBEL projects, total team commitment is imperative for success of the project.

“A”

This is not the first CBEL project I participated in, but it was definitely the most unique one. It was an exclusive chance to communicate with people from different classes in this society and to gain a closer view on their lives. This project provided me an in-depth knowledge about food-related imperfections that has embedded in Canada’s food system throughout these years. Therefore, I started to deliberate divergently about the interaction between the human society and the various food systems as well as other similar social problems. The teamwork process was enjoyable since ambitious plans require effective cooperation. The process of this project, especially the scheduling part, was challenging. However, such challenges were significantly valuable because throughout this progress, I gained ground experiences in problem solving that are obviously absent in lecture room. Through this project, I briefly explored a numbers of structural difficulties that an immigrant-based community is facing. Since our project provided them with practicable solution, our effort as a team was appreciated by the community. It is pleasant to see our work was helpful to the minority groups, along with effectiveness in building a better community service system.

“J”

Reflecting on our work, I feel pessimistic. I do not believe that an academic pursuit should compromise the privacy of individuals. Disrespect for privacy is not congruous with my value system. However, what we accomplished was an intrusion into the socio-economic background and cultural belief systems of immigrants. The speed, which we required to complete this task, resulted in insensitivity and a lack of consideration for privacy. Despite our efforts for ethics, I think our hastiness compelled us to act rashly in order to solicit the most information in the shortest amount of time. Perhaps if we had more time we could have developed a stronger rapport with our foreign collaborators. Then, we would have been asking friends, who would be more willing to share sensitive information - not strangers, into whose lives we pried like hunting crows digging into dirt with beaks in the Vancouver rain. Now, a desire to provide food security to immigrants is noble; and, mollifying food insecurity

of newcomers is compatible with respecting their privacy. But, in my opinion, we did not act punctiliously. Our intent was righteous and I do not think anyone in LFS 350 neglected the sensitive nature of our undertaking. Yet, in our haste, we neglected propriety. Our good intent, our desire to aid the food security of newcomers, our hope to be a part of something noble, made us act rashly. Is it wrong to believe in such hope?

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