Opinion Article

The Sociocultural Dimension of Family Food Security

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Introduction

The historical and social development of food security has gone through epistemic gaps that have marked the capacity for social integration of food as a sociocultural fact. The latter is configured around the interrelation of economic, social and cultural factors that nuance the relationships between individuals, groups and families. Hence, this article addresses the analysis of the structures, practices, actors and meanings that intervene in the social construction of family food security as a sociological phenomenon.

During the 1970s, complex economic circumstances at the international level led to changes in access to food. The transformations were referred to the formation of a new dimension of study in food security at the global level, the availability of food. This dimension has in its theoretical base the economic pattern or meaning, since it is introduced to compensate for the constant fluctuations of the market in the relation between production and price.

In the 1980s, this economistic sense was maintained in the research carried out by the FAO on food security. It is valid to point out the incorporation of the access dimension (physical and economic) in order to obtain enough food to achieve an active and healthy life [1]. From this definition, a paradigm shift is identified around food security by incorporating the problem of access within the social and symbolic structures that condition food integration or disintegration.

This economistic logic reduces the social and cultural dimension of food security. Although the problem of access to food is conditioned by economic factors [2, 3], its study is not restricted to this variable. Also, the social and symbolic practices built at the family level configure this accessibility in interrelation with the economic system of society. Within this framework of analysis, the family space stands out as an area for the construction of practices, norms and meanings where social actors interconnect through their assets and resources to satisfy their food needs or preferences.

Hence, in the first half of the 1980s, the concept of Family Food Security arose (household food security), whose objective is aimed at the access of all people to sufficient amounts of food for an active and healthy life. Its essential elements are the availability of food and the possibility of acquiring it [4]. Although in this new conception the family is inserted as a study variable at a micro scale, assessments at this level continue to focus on economic factors (availability, supply and income) that generate a food breakdown in family relationships.

Regarding the previous affirmation, the transformations that this conception underwent denote its social and cultural dimension. In this regard, Sen (1983) [5] emphasizes that achieving food security at the household level is not only a problem of production and consumption, but also of access to food. The latter constitutes a fundamental right for all social groups, a basic ability to achieve food well-being. In this perspective, access is configured from social integration as an inclusive, participatory process, construction of meanings and relationships between individual or collective actors.

The situation raised shows an important turning point in the analysis of the SAF from the irruption of the social sphere. This epistemic change is assumed by the theoretical positions of

sociocultural origin [6-8], who reveal the symbolic structures that underlie the food space. Within this sociocultural approach, three anthropological perspectives (functionalist, structuralist and materialist) converge. The first addresses the social role of food in different human communities. From this perspective, access to food has the function of integrating and socializing these groups [9]. The second focuses on the construction of the symbolic structure that mediates social relations around food [10]. This structure materializes in the production and reproduction of food norms, meanings and practices.

The third of these perspectives refers that the production, distribution, preparation and consumption of food must be valued in its socioeconomic and cultural context [11]. Here the interrelation between food and the different social, economic and cultural factors that influence food social integration is highlighted. In general, the contributions of these perspectives to the sociological understanding of food are located in its capacity for social integration, the symbolic structures built in these food social relationships and the socioeconomic framework that conditions them. Although these three elements contribute to forming a sociocultural matrix to interpret access to food, the links that interweave structures, actors, practices, and environment are sometimes addressed in isolation, without explicitly recognizing their complex interconnections and interdependencies household level.

From this sociocultural field, food security in the family space is permeated by meanings, symbols and norms about food, as well as the production and reproduction of social practices that structure family relationships in the food field. Regarding the sociological field, this sociocultural approach analyzes the food phenomenon from the various behaviors, representations and interactions built by individual and collective actors.

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