

ABOUT THE RESEARCH PROJECT

INTERVIEW WITH MARLYNE SAHAKIAN

Project co-coordinator and lead researcher



1. These six films talk about food consumption in Metro Manila and Bangalore. How did the films emerge?

The films are a result of a two-year academic research project focused on the changing food consumption practices, patterns and policies related to the middle classes in Metro Manila and Bangalore. Middle classes, in the plural, as this turns out to be quite a heterogeneous group of people with varying income and education levels, housing types, and lifestyles. Oftentimes the middle classes in South and Southeast Asia are portrayed as resource predators, aspiring to Western lifestyles. We wanted to present a more nuanced picture. The heart of this research project was to use ethnographic methods, interviewing household members and observing food consumption in the home, at work, in restaurants and a variety of other settings. In addition to uncovering everyday practices related to food consumption, we were interested in the environmental impacts of food consumption, as well as how policies related to food production and waste are evolving in each context.

2. How do you apprehend food consumption practices in these two different settings?

We wanted to deflect attention away from the notion of the individual and rational consumer, but rather look at what people are doing and saying in their everyday lives and in relation to social practices (see Form 3). We explicitly considered norms and prescriptions around food consumption, but also the material dimension of food – where it could be accessed, stored, prepared and wasted. This approach was very useful to us, as we discovered that preparing and eating meal has to do with many other factors, not just people and their decision-making processes. We saw a major trend towards eating out, for example, and the role the service sector could play in reducing food waste. We also saw the role that domestic helpers play in managing food stock and avoiding food waste, in the home. In Metro Manila, we ended up exploring the significance of condominium lifestyles on food storage, preparation and consumption – the size of a kitchen and cost of air-conditioning play a role in food consumption practices, towards the trend in eating out. In Bangalore, we realized that collective conventions around what makes for a tasty meal has to do with freshness of produce, which has a consequence for food waste. When produce is accessed and cooked on a daily basis, there's less stock to manage and thus less waste.

3. What were some of the major differences between food consumption practices in Metro Manila and Bangalore?

There are both similarities and differences, as can be expected. The notion of a weekend and weekday is pretty homogenous across the two research sites: people have more of a routine in place during the weekday, while weekends are about leisure activities and spending time with friends and family. In both contexts, middle class household also employ domestic helpers, generally women, who help prepare meals in the home. There are also many ways in which food consumption is different, and one has to do with taste judgments – which of course relate to the different historical contexts. One difference worth noting is around vegetarianism and commensality: in Bangalore, caste and religion will set prescriptions around the consumption of beef, for example; we found that when people eat out, in the thriving Bangalore restaurant scene, they will experiment more with meat consumption than when in the home. In Metro Manila, it's just the opposite: meat tends to be quite a staple in everyday diets and in the home, but when people eat out, they might try vegetarian cuisine as a form of culinary adventure. There's also a clear trend towards eating organic and healthy food in Metro Manila. In Bangalore, freshness (gathered through smell, touch and sight) trumps notions of what is defined as "organic" on a label.

4. You mention patterns of consumption, did you also measure food consumption and waste?

We attempted to measure food flows, considering the home as part of a Material Flow Analysis – a tool drawn from industrial ecology approaches (see Form 2). In Metro Manila, we asked about thirty household members to consider what they had eaten in the past week. This is what's called a memory recall method, used for example in national surveys. We were able to get at quantities and weights, but these estimates are only proxies for actual measurements. In Bangalore, we did engage with several households to actually measure the food going in and out of the home. It's a resource intensive process and also relies on households who are willing to go along. Most importantly, in both cases, we found that it was important to keep a reflexive stance between the qualitative and quantitative research: you can get measurements, but what do they mean and how do they come about? You can describe practices, but are they significant when it comes to environmental impact?

Additional resources:

The following two publications could be useful for further reading on this topic:

Burger Chakraborty, L., M. Sahakian, U. Rani, M. Shenoy and S. Erkman (2016). "Urban food consumption in Metro Manila: Inter-disciplinary approaches towards apprehending practices, patterns and impacts." Journal of Industrial Ecology.

Leray, L., M. Sahakian and S. Erkman (accepted, in press 2016). "Understanding household food metabolism: relating micro-level material flow analysis to consumption practices." Journal of Cleaner Production.