

Reflections on nutrition in biological anthropology

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1 | INTRODUCTION

Some 50 years ago, and befittingly at an AAPA dinner, Stanley Garn delivered the Presidential Address, which he titled Nutrition in Physical Anthropology. In his address, Garn predicted, "a concern with nutrition in its broadest sense, including the physical form of the dietary and the energy balance will occupy us more rather than less in the years to come, as we channel our interests to ascertain the directions of evolutionary and physiological change..." (Garn, 1966). He specifically mentioned the nutritional underpinning of our interests in the evolution of the genus *Homo*, the diets of nonhuman primates, child growth, and sexual maturation, secular changes in adult body size, and growing evidence that obesity was replacing malnutrition in some populations.

In this essay, we will take up Garn's prediction and review the themes related to human nutrition that occupy us in 2018. We define nutrition broadly: the consumption of food and the effect of food energy and nutrients on body size, health, and function. Nutrition is an area of interest shared with nutritional scientists and public health professionals, but the anthropological lens provides a view that is more comparative and evolutionary. As biological anthropologists, we are interested in the nutrition of a wide range of contemporary populations, as well as that of historic and prehistoric populations and the hominins in our evolutionary past. We consider nutrition as a key environmental factor in shaping human variability and evolution, and use the principles of evolution to explain variation between populations in the present as well as the past. We also recognize the inseparable nature of human cultural and biological adaptation to the environment, and hence use the explanatory frameworks referred to as biocultural or biobehavioral to address the biological-cultural nexus in studying nutrition.

Three thematic areas have been prominent in the research of biological anthropologists in the past decade: diet in the evolution of the genus *Homo*, diet and nutrition in the transition from hunting and gathering to agriculture, and diet and nutrition in the current era of globalization. These thematic areas are defined by the time-period of interest and questions asked, but each is viewed as a transition in diet with measurable outcomes in terms of morphology and/or health. In the Paleolithic, major questions revolve around changes in the dietary niche of *Homo*, specifically the availability of dietary energy that enabled significant changes in the morphology (body size and brain size) observed. In the Neolithic, it is clear that the transition from foraging wild plant and animal species to the production of food via agriculture and animal husbandry changed the dietary niche in very significant ways. The timing and pace of this transition varied across geographic regions with the earliest dates at about 10,000 BCE. Questions of interest are related to how changes in nutritional ecology impacted body morphology and health in different geographical regions. In the current era, transitions in diet are associated with processes of industrialization and globalization that result in increases in food availability. Almost all human populations find themselves at some stage of this newest nutrition transition. Questions of interest revolve around the timing and pace of the transition in different populations, and the linkages between the changes in diet and the changes in body size, composition, and risk of chronic disease.

Here we will consider each of the three thematic areas in turn. First, we will highlight major points in their historical development. Second, drawing on the research of biological anthropologists in the past decade, we will provide illustrative examples of each of these themes. We note, however, that given the interdisciplinary nature of current research, many people are associated with more than one

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