Sociocultural and Ethical Concerns of Australian Food Consumers

Key Knowledge 4.2.3

Sociocultural and ethical concerns of Australian food consumers, and the ways in which these concerns affect individual food choices and the range of foods available.

Key Skills 4.1.1

Discuss sociocultural, sustainability, and ethical concerns affecting food systems.

Key Skills 4.1.2

Evaluate contributions of innovations and technologies to food security in terms of ethics and sustainability

Terms and Definitions

Culture is a term used to describe a particular set of beliefs, behaviours, objects, and other characteristics of a group of people, including cultural norms, customs, values, and rules.

Cultural factors are beliefs and behaviours that influence our behaviour.

Food ethics refers to people's decisions on what they eat based on a sense of what is right or wrong. For example, some people believe that killing animals for food is cruel and therefore refrain from eating meat.

Sociocultural is a term used to describe a combination of social and cultural factors.

Ethical and Sociocultural Concerns

What we eat and how we think about food can be shaped by both ethical and sociocultural concerns. Sociocultural concerns examine how our community or society influences our attitudes and behaviours. Ethical concerns, on the other hand, are more about what we individually believe is right or wrong. These two areas often overlap and intersect.

Ethical Concerns

Ethics are all about aligning our actions with our personal sense of what's right or wrong. These moral principles are really important when we talk about food and the food system because every day we make choices about what we're going to eat. These decisions can impact the environment, animals, and people involved in food production.

Ethical concerns about food can include fair pay for farm workers, treating animals well, farming in a way that's good for the environment, and making sure the food we eat is good for us. The choices we make about food can have significant impacts on the world around us.

With regard to food, ethical concerns might be about caring for animals, protecting the environment, fair treatment for workers, and the impact of food production on our health. If we're guided by ethical concerns, we might choose to support sustainable farming, advocate for animal welfare, or buy food that's local or fair trade. Basically, our ethical concerns reflect our own beliefs about what's morally right or wrong in the food system.

Watch this video about the relationship between ethics and our food choices: https://vimeo.com/272330915

Watch this video about why people are making more ethical food choices: https://youtu.be/U9JgunhxlXE

Sociocultural Concerns

The term "sociocultural" combines two words: "socio," which is about society and how people interact, and "cultural," which is about the things people learn and share, like beliefs, values, traditions, and practices. Put together, "sociocultural" refers to the values, behaviours, and norms that are part of a specific community or society.

Sociocultural concerns are issues that matter to specific groups of people in a society. Different groups can have different concerns based on influencing factors such as their background, education, income, where they live, their age, their gender, and other parts of their social identity. These concerns arise from each group's unique experiences, values, beliefs, and norms in the groups they interact with in society.

In the food system, different groups can have different sociocultural concerns. For instance, environmentalists might support a plant-based diet because they're worried about the impact of raising animals for food on the environment. People of the Hindu faith might also follow a plant-based diet, but for them, it's about respecting animals and avoiding eating meat. So, different groups can have their own unique concerns and values within the food system.

Understanding and addressing these sociocultural concerns is a key part of making our food system better for everyone. By acknowledging and respecting the different values and beliefs of various groups, we can work towards a food system that respects and includes everyone's needs and backgrounds.

Similarities and Differences

Ethical concerns and sociocultural concerns share similarities and have distinct differences:

Similarities:

Both ethical concerns and sociocultural concerns are based on values and beliefs held by individuals or specific groups within a society. Both concepts are subjective in nature, as they are influenced by personal perspectives and cultural backgrounds. Both ethical concerns and sociocultural concerns can influence individuals' behaviors and choices, particularly in the context of food decisions.

Differences:

Ethical concerns primarily are based on moral principles and considerations of what is right or wrong. On the other hand, sociocultural concerns are more specific to particular groups, communities, or societies. They are shaped by social traditions, practices, and norms within these specific groups.

Ethical concerns in the food system often focus on issues such as animal welfare, environmental sustainability, fair treatment for workers, and health impacts. Sociocultural concerns, on the other hand, emphasise the values, behaviours, and norms within specific groups or communities. They may include considerations like religious or cultural dietary restrictions, and traditional food practices.

Ethical concerns are often discussed at an individual level, emphasising personal moral responsibility and decision-making. Sociocultural concerns are more group based, focusing on the values, beliefs, and norms shared within a specific group or community. They are influenced by social interactions and cultural dynamics.

In summary, ethical concerns tend to be focused on broader moral principles, while sociocultural concerns are more context-specific, shaped by the values and norms within particular groups or communities. However, both concepts play significant roles in shaping food choices, behaviours, and the overall food system.

Examples of Ethical and Sociocultural Concerns

Sociocultural concerns typically refers to a concern that is specific to a particular group of people within a society. It emerges from the social and cultural factors that shape and influence the beliefs, behaviours, practices, norms, and values of that group. On the other hand, an ethical concern is a broader concept that can be held by individuals across different groups or societies. Ethical concerns revolve around personal judgments of what is morally acceptable or unacceptable. They involve aligning choices with one's personal morals and values, and they can arise from individual beliefs and principles.

The following table presents various topics relevant to the food system, along with examples of ethical concerns and sociocultural concerns associated with each of the topics.

Ethical Concerns	Sociocultural Concerns
Many individuals are concerned about the treatment of animals in food production. They advocate for farming practices that prioritize the well-being of animals, such as avoiding overcrowding, minimising harsh treatments, and providing access to outdoor space and natural behaviours. Ethical concerns related to the environment focus on reducing the impact of food production on ecosystems and natural resources. This includes supporting sustainable farming practices, promoting regenerative agriculture, minimising pollution, reducing deforestation, and addressing climate change. Ethical concerns related to health involve making choices that prioritise personal well-being and avoiding harm. This includes advocating for access to nutritious and safe food, supporting transparency in food labelling, and promoting awareness of the health implications of certain food choices, such as reducing the consumption of processed foods or excessive sugar.	Different religious and cultural groups may have specific dietary restrictions or guidelines. For example, followers of Islam may observe halal dietary practices, while Hindus may adhere to vegetarian or vegan diets. Sociocultural concerns include respecting and accommodating these dietary preferences and restrictions. Sociocultural concerns involve preserving and promoting traditional food practices that hold cultural and historical significance. This can involve maintaining traditional cooking methods, using specific ingredients or spices, and passing down traditional recipes from one generation to another. Sociocultural concerns involve addressing food justice issues and ensuring equitable access to healthy and culturally appropriate food for all communities. This includes tackling food insecurity, addressing food deserts, and advocating for inclusive and culturally sensitive food policies and programs.

Individual Food Choices and the Range of Foods Available

What people eat can be influenced a lot by their cultural backgrounds and their values. For example, people from different cultural backgrounds may prefer certain types of food. When lots of people from the same cultural group want those foods, shops and restaurants will start selling them. This means we get more variety in the food available to buy.

Also, what people think is right or wrong can change what foods are made. For instance, if many people care about animal rights, the environment, or fair trade, they will want to buy food that respects these things. This can lead to new types of food being made and sold, that consider these ethical values.

Animal Welfare Concerns

Many people worry about how animals are treated in food production. They are concerned about things like overcrowding, harsh treatments, antibiotic use, pollution, and the effect on the environment, like deforestation and methane gas. These worries have made people interested in other ways to make food, such as organic farming, free-range systems, and even plant-based diets. As people become more concerned about animal welfare, the types of food available are changing:

- **Plant-Based Foods:** Concern for animals has led to more plant-based foods in the shops. This includes things like plant-based meats and milk alternatives like almond and soy milk.

- **Animal Welfare Certified Products:** To meet demand, some food makers and shops sell products that are certified as being good for animal welfare. These include things like meat, eggs, or milk made under certain standards, such as being palm oil free.

- **Grass-fed Beef:** Grass-fed beef has gained significant prevalence in the market due to growing consumer demand for healthier and more sustainable meat options. Grass-fed cattle are allowed to graze on natural pastures, enabling them to engage in their natural behaviours and have a higher quality of life. Grass-fed systems often prioritise animal welfare by avoiding the use of antibiotics. It also typically has a lower environmental impact, as it requires less intensive land use, reduces the need for synthetic fertilisers, and contributes to the preservation of natural ecosystems.

- **Free-range Animal Products:** There has been a big shift to the use of free-range eggs, pork, and chicken in recent years. Farmers have embraced sustainable and compassionate approaches, offering eggs from hens with ample space to roam, pork from pigs provided with outdoor access, and chicken raised in spacious, natural environments. This shift addresses ethical concerns, ensures higher quality products, and allows conscious consumers to make a positive impact on animal welfare while supporting a more compassionate food system.
  Click here to find out more about rearing animals and farming practices in Australia.
  Click here to find out the differences between the different animal related farming practices in Australia.

Watch this advertisement for plant-based meats: https://youtu.be/oKe43cZR5Xw

Watch these videos about the foods endorsed by the RSPCA: https://youtu.be/r4H18SRywQA

Sustainability Concerns

People are becoming more concerned about how food production affects the environment. Issues like deforestation, water scarcity and pollution, soil degradation, and food waste all contribute to environmental harm and climate change. Addressing these challenges is important for creating a sustainable food system. These new ways of producing food give people more options that are good for the environment. As a result, those who are concerned about environmental sustainability have more choices that align with their values. Because of these concerns, the types of food available are changing:

- **Lab-Grown Meat:** Innovations are being made in response to sustainability and ethical concerns surrounding traditional animal farming practices. Lab-grown meat, also known as cultured meat, is emerging as a viable alternative to conventional meat production. This technology allows meat to be produced in a laboratory using animal cells, minimising the impact of rearing cattle on the environment as well as and reducing harm to animals. However, there are apprehensions among some individuals who worry about the potential negative impact on traditional farming methods, raising ethical concerns regarding the livelihoods of farmers.

- **3D-Printed Meat:** Another innovative approach, known as 3D-printed meat, has the potential solution to address the increasing demand for meat while addressing sustainability and ethical concerns. In this process, leftover cuts from animals are transformed into ink for 3D printers, enabling the creation of meat-like structures. While this technology shows promise, there are concerns that it may compromise the quality of the meat and pose challenges to the livelihoods of farmers. Companies such as Vow from Australia are actively exploring the development of lab-grown meats, considering sustainability and ethical aspects. Additionally, Meat and Livestock Australia is also investigating the possibilities of 3D-printed meat, aiming to find a balance between meeting consumer demands and ensuring the well-being of farmers.

- [Click here](#) to find out about an Australian company, Vow, which is researching and developing cellular or lab-grown meats.

- **Insects as Protein:** More people are looking at insects like crickets and mealworms as a source of protein. Insect farming uses less land, water, and feed compared to traditional livestock farming. Plus, insects produce fewer greenhouse gases. This has led to new food products like protein bars, powders, and even burgers made from insects.

- **Farmed Fish:** Aquafarming is a way to raise fish, shellfish, and plants in controlled environments. This practice can help protect wild fish populations and marine ecosystems from overfishing. Also, using new types of fish feed made from plants, insects, or algae can help reduce the environmental impact of aquafarming.

- **Vertical Farming:** Vertical farming involves growing crops in stacked layers, often indoors. It's space-efficient, reduces the need for pesticides and herbicides, and can be used to grow produce close to urban areas, reducing the carbon footprint associated with food transportation.

- **Food Waste:** Companies are turning food waste into new, edible products. For instance, some companies make soup or chips from 'ugly' vegetables that grocery stores won't sell, while others use spent grains from beer production to make granola bars or cookies.

Watch this video to discover more about the aquaculture sector in Victoria: https://youtu.be/2LZr7F_iyso

Watch this video to learn about lab-grown meat: https://youtu.be/29GFYxI4tek

Health and Nutrition Concerns

People are becoming more aware of how the food they eat affects their health. They want to avoid things like pesticides, genetically modified crops, and artificial additives, which can all have potential health risks. These trends reflect a growing consumer awareness about the relationship between diet and health, and a corresponding shift in the food industry to meet these demands. So, as people become more health-conscious, they have more choices that may or may not be good for their health. This is changing what foods are available to buy. Because of these concerns, the types of food available are changing:

- **Organic Produce:** Some people are worried about the health risks from pesticides in food. They prefer organic options, which are grown without synthetic chemicals. This has led to more organic produce being available in shops.

- **GMO-Free Foods:** Some people worry about the potential health impacts of genetically modified (GMO) crops. This has led to more demand for GMO-free foods. Now, there are more GMO-free options in the market, and labels often tell you if a product is GMO-free.

- **Additive-Free and Minimally Processed Foods:** Health-conscious people often prefer foods with few artificial additives, preservatives, or sweeteners. They look for natural, whole foods and products with

simple ingredient labels. This has led to more additive-free and minimally processed food options being available.

- **Functional Foods:** Probiotics, for instance, are being added to a range of foods like yogurt, kombucha, and even chocolate. Omega-3 fatty acids, antioxidants, and fibre are also being added to foods for their potential health benefits.

- **Plant-based Dairy Alternatives:** Plant-based alternatives to dairy, such as almond, oat, soy, and cashew milk, are becoming increasingly popular among people with dietary restrictions, lactose intolerance, or those just looking for lower-calorie options.

- **Reduced-Sugar Products:** As the health implications of sugar become more widely understood, there has been an increase in products with reduced sugar content or alternatives like stevia, erythritol, and monk fruit.

- **Gluten-Free Foods:** For those with coeliac disease or gluten intolerance, a wider range of gluten-free products are available today. This includes bread, pasta, and a variety of baked goods.

- **Fortified Foods**: Many foods are fortified with vitamins and minerals to address nutritional deficiencies. For example, folic acid is added to flour to prevent neural tube defects in newborns, and iodine is added to salt to prevent thyroid problems.

- **Prepared Meal Services:** With the rise of meal delivery services, companies are offering prepared meals tailored to specific dietary requirements or dietary goals.

- **Protein-Enriched Foods:** A wide range of protein-enriched products are appearing, including snack bars, cereals, and even ice creams.

Watch these videos about organic foods: https://youtu.be/pNqExDLuqx4 and https://youtu.be/K9LNuZdjEec

Cultural Preservation and Food Sovereignty Concerns

Concerns related to cultural preservation greatly influence the food choices and variety of food available to Australian consumers, particularly regarding the protection of cultural heritage, traditional food customs, and indigenous wisdom.

- **Indigenous Foods:** A growing number of consumers choose to support indigenous communities by buying food products that are sourced from indigenous producers and employ traditional ingredients and cooking methods. As a result, the availability of indigenous foods, such as bush tucker ingredients, native fruits, and traditional spices, has increased in stores and markets.

- **Multicultural Foods:** Australians who value culinary diversity and the preservation of cultural food traditions express their interest by exploring and consuming foods from diverse cultures. This interest promotes inclusivity and celebrates multiculturalism, resulting in a broader range of international food options. These include specialty ingredients, imported goods, and a wide array of multicultural cuisine in restaurants and supermarkets. These cultural preservation considerations often overlap with sustainability and ethical sourcing concerns.

Fair Trade and Social Justice Concerns

Concerns around Fair Trade and social justice are significant among Australian food consumers, as they aim to endorse equitable practices within the food industry. These considerations shape their food choices and influence the diversity of food available.

- **Fair Trade-certified products:** Many consumers aim to ensure fair wages and secure working conditions for local and international farmers, agricultural laborers, and food producers. Consequently, they prefer products with Fair Trade certifications, signifying that producers receive fair pay for their work. This interest has led to an expanded selection of Fair Trade-certified products, including coffee, tea, chocolate, and bananas.

- **Products from small-scale farmers, indigenous communities, and local producers:** Consumers are increasingly eager to support marginalised communities and tackle social injustices within the food system. They do this by purchasing products from small-scale farmers, indigenous communities, and local

producers, promoting economic empowerment and societal wellbeing. As a result, there's a greater availability of products sourced from these communities, such as indigenous foods, artisanal items, and goods from social enterprises.

Watch this video about an indigenous farm: https://youtu.be/-Ye_JWLuhuM

Watch this video to find out what a social enterprise is: https://youtu.be/AA-mvtUXtg0

Written Activity One

Question Time

1. What does ethics refer to when it comes to food choices and the food system?

2. What are some examples of ethical concerns people may have about Australia's food system?

1. How can these ethical concerns affect the range of foods available and individual food choices in Australia?

2. What are the similarities between ethical and sociocultural concerns?

3. What is the difference between ethical and sociocultural concerns?

4. Why is it important that food producers understand and address sociocultural concerns in the food system?

5. How have ethical related concerns, specifically related to animal welfare, influenced the range of food products available in the market? Provide examples of new food options that have emerged as a result.

6. How have health and nutrition related concerns have influenced the availability of different types of food in the market? Provide examples of specific food options that have emerged as a result of these concerns.

7. How have sustainability related concerns have influenced the availability of different types of food in the market? Provide examples of specific food options that have emerged as a result of these concerns.

8. How have food sovereignty related concerns have influenced the availability of different types of food in the market? Provide examples of specific food options that have emerged as a result of these concerns.

Written Activity Two

Sociocultural and Ethical Labels

Class Activity

In this activity you will explore the sociocultural and ethical concerns of Australian food consumers and the ways in which these concerns affect individual food choices and the range of foods available.

Working in small groups, select one of the terms often found on food labels in Australia.

1. Australian Certified Organic (ACO) - https://aco.net.au/
   - What does the ACO certification stand for, and what are its requirements?
   - When was the ACO certification introduced, and by whom?
   - Why was there a need to introduce the ACO certification?
   - What kinds of products are likely to display the ACO certification on their labels?

2. Good Environmental Choice Australia (GECA) - https://geca.eco/
   - What is the purpose and significance of the GECA certification?
   - Who introduced the GECA certification and when?
   - What was the driving force behind the creation of the GECA certification?
   - Which types of products are likely to feature the GECA certification on their labels?

3. Marine Stewardship Council (MSC) - https://www.msc.org/en-au
   - What is the mission and focus of the MSC certification?
   - Who established the MSC certification, and when was it introduced?
   - What prompted the development of the MSC certification?
   - Which types of products are likely to bear the MSC certification?

4. Fairtrade - https://fairtradeanz.org/what-is-fairtrade
   - What principles and standards does the Fairtrade certification promote?
   - When was Fairtrade introduced, and by whom?
   - What need or objective led to the establishment of Fairtrade?
   - What kinds of products are commonly associated with the Fairtrade certification?

5. Demeter Biodynamic - https://demeterbiodynamic.com.au/certification/
   - What does the Demeter Biodynamic certification signify?
   - When was the Demeter Biodynamic certification introduced and by whom?
   - Why was there a need to introduce the Demeter Biodynamic certification?
   - Which types of products are likely to showcase the Demeter Biodynamic certification?

6. Rainforest Alliance - https://www.rainforest-alliance.org/why-certification/
   - What does the Rainforest Alliance certification represent?
   - Who initiated the Rainforest Alliance certification and when?
   - What motivated the creation of the Rainforest Alliance certification?
   - What kinds of products are commonly associated with the Rainforest Alliance certification?

Class Discussion Questions:

1. What are the main ethical and sociocultural concerns that the labelling logos represented?
2. How do these concerns affect individual food choices and the range of foods available?
3. How can consumers make more ethical and sustainable food choices?
4. What ethical and sustainable practices are important to you?
5. How can they make more informed and ethical food choices in the future?

Practical Activity One

Which Egg?

In this activity, you will compare and contrast the sensory properties of eggs produced through different farming methods and conduct research to understand the implications of various egg production methods on animal welfare and environmental sustainability.

In small groups, sample each of the eggs on display and record your results in the table below:

Sensory Analysis								
Select the 'egg' face that best represents how you feel about each egg and describes the egg's sensory properties.								
Egg						Describe the sensory properties of this egg.		
						Appearance	Aroma	Texture	Taste
A									
B									
C									
D									
Identify the production system that you think each egg was produced in.								
Caged Egg		Barn-laid Eggs		Free-Range Eggs		Organic Eggs		
Wait for your teacher to tell you what egg was from which production system. Record your response below.								
Caged Egg		Barn-laid Eggs		Free-Range Eggs		Organic Eggs		
Caged Egg		Barn-laid Eggs		Free-Range Eggs		Organic Eggs		

Research Activity:

In small groups, select one of the egg farming methods and research this method. When researching, find out about animal welfare, environmental impact, nutritional composition, and regulations/standards.

Group Discussion and Decision-Making:

Share your findings about the different egg farming methods.

As a group, decide which egg farming method is best and justify your decision.

Practical Activity Two

Science Experiment: Free-Range versus Conventional Food Products

Objective:

To assess and compare the sensory properties of free-range and conventional food products and determine if there are any discernible differences.

Materials Needed:

- Free-range and similar conventional food products (for example, eggs, chicken, etc.)
- Kitchen equipment (for example, pans, stove, oven, etc.)
- Tasting spoons or forks
- Plates or trays for serving
- Sensory evaluation forms or scorecards
- Pen or pencil for each participant

Procedure:

1. Your teacher will provide you with two similar types of prepared and cooked food products, one free-range and one conventional, for comparison. For example, you could compare free-range eggs with conventional eggs or free-range chicken with conventionally raised chicken.

2. Your teacher will assign a unique identifier to each sample to maintain anonymity during the evaluation.

3. Using the form below, identify a word that describes the sensory properties of each food sample and give it a rating.

Food Product	Appearance	Texture	Aroma	Taste	Rating
A					
B					

Group Discussion:

1. In your small groups, discuss your findings, considering any significant differences observed in the sensory properties between the free-range and conventional food products.

2. Ask your teacher to reveal which sample is which.

3. Reflect on the implications of the results and their potential impact on consumer preferences and choices.

Summary Activity

Sociocultural and Ethical Concerns

What is the main idea about this key knowledge & key skill? (Two or three sentences in your own words)

Define each of the terms listed below:	
Ethical Concern	
Sociocultural Concern	

What are the similarities between ethical and sociocultural concerns?

What are the differences between ethical and sociocultural concerns?

Provide some examples of ethical and sociocultural concerns below.	
Ethical Concerns	**Sociocultural Concerns**
List three food products below that address an ethical or sociocultural concern.	**Which ethical and/or sociocultural concern each food product addresses?**

Exam Preparation

Multiple-Choice Questions (5 marks)

Choose the response that is correct or that **best answers** the question.

1. The term 'ethical' refers to?

    a. A cultural practice observed in various societies.

    b. The process of learning a new language.

    c. Principles and values concerning what is right and wrong behaviour.

    d. The characteristics of accepted behaviour.

2. The term "sociocultural" refers to:

    a. The rules and regulations of a society.

    b. The values, behaviours, and norms that are part of a specific community or society.

    c. The geographical location of a society.

    d. The political structure of a society.

3. Sociocultural concerns about food can be influenced by all the following factors EXCEPT:

    a. Background and education

    b. Income and location

    c. Age and gender

    d. Favourite colour

4. According to a 2019 Statista report, a significant percentage of Australians identified themselves as vegans, vegetarians, meat reducers, and flexitarians. Which of the following food products might a company consider developing to cater to the dietary preferences indicated by this report?

    a. A new range of meat-based fast-food burgers.

    b. A variety of dairy-heavy desserts.

    c. Plant-based meat substitutes and protein-rich grains.

    d. A line of seafood snacks.

5. Which of the following ethical concerns in the food system is most directly related to animal welfare?

    a. The intensive confinement and inhumane treatment of animals in some livestock farming practices.

    b. The use of pesticides and fertilisers in crop production can contaminate water sources.

    c. The unfair wages and poor working conditions often faced by farm workers.

    d. The environmental impact of excessive packaging in processed food products.

Short Answer Questions (15 marks)

Question 1 (6 marks)

In the table below, identify one sociocultural concern that animal activists and parents of school-aged children may have with regard to the food system. Explain why this might be a sociocultural concern to each group.

Groups	Sociocultural Concern	Explanation
Animal Activists		
Parents of School-aged Children		

Question 2 (3 marks)

Identify one food product that each of the following consumers might be inclined to buy based on their ethical concerns:

For 3 x 1 marks, the student needed to identify one ethical concern that might influence a consumer's decision to purchase each of the products listed.

Ethical Concern	Food Product
Someone concerned about the ethical treatment and fair compensation of farmers and workers in the cocoa industry.	
Someone who is aware of the harm that synthetic pesticides and fertilisers can cause to the environment, including soil degradation, water contamination, and harm to wildlife.	
Someone who is concerned about the conditions in which hens are kept in conventional or cage-based systems, including lack of space, inability to exhibit natural behaviours, and associated stress and health issues.	

Question 3 (6 marks)

Identify three ethical concerns that Australian food consumers may have and explain how these concerns could impact the range of foods available on the market.

Ethical Concern One

Ethical Concern Two

Ethical Concern Three