Dissecting Diets

In 2001, a research team from the Harvard School of Public Health released new dietary recommendations based on several comprehensive studies of diet and health\(^1\). Their recommendations, called the Healthy Eating Pyramid, have received both praise and criticism. In this activity, you’ll examine a number of different sets of dietary recommendations as well as some critiques of these recommendations. Your job is to identify the assumptions, arguments, and evidence in these critiques.

Below are figures that represent three different dietary recommendations: the USDA Pyramid (1992), the Healthy Eating Pyramid (2001), and the Mediterranean Diet Pyramid (1994). Also included is a pyramid representing the typical American diet. Examine these figures and then answer the questions below.

Choose two characteristics and compare the three recommendations using those characteristics.

Comparison 1:

Comparison 2:

Which set of recommendations does the typical American diet most resemble? What evidence supports your determination?


Gifford critiques the USDA Pyramid. Does he make a claim about the pyramid or support his claim with evidence? If so, identify both the claim and the evidence in his statement.

Claim:

Evidence:

Do you think his claim is sufficiently supported? Why or why not?

What assumptions does Gifford make in his critique of the USDA Pyramid?

Provide three alternative explanations for the “American epidemic of obesity” and describe how your alternatives could result in an obesity epidemic.

Professor Nathan Shier of Indiana University says “USDA is simple. The one problem with dietary guidelines is that it gets too complicated for the public, so people say, ‘Oh forget it.’ It’s written for the masses, for all education levels. It’s made for people who need something simple. Therefore, it isn’t as in-depth as it should be.” (IDS February 12, 2003). Shier critiques the USDA pyramid. Does he make a claim about the pyramid or support his claim with evidence? If so, identify both the claim and the evidence in his statement.

Claim:

Evidence:

Do you think his claim is sufficiently supported? Why or why not?

What assumptions does Shier make in his critique of the USDA Pyramid?

Provide two alternative methods of describing dietary guidelines that would convey MORE information than the USDA Pyramid and so satisfy one of Shier’s criticisms.

In his critique of the Healthy Eating Pyramid, Dr. John McDougall says “You can’t condemn white rice when more than a billion people live on it and maintain superior health.” (Newsweek January 20, 2003). McDougall critiques the Healthy Eating Pyramid. Does he make a claim about the pyramid or support his claim with evidence? If so, identify both the claim and the evidence in his statement.

Claim:

Evidence:

Do you think his claim is sufficiently supported? Why or why not?

What assumptions does McDougall make in his critique of the Healthy Eating Pyramid?
Provide three alternative reasons why people with high intake of white rice may have “superior health”.

Newsweek reports: “The Healthy Eating Pyramid may still need refinement, but as a guide to good health it clearly trumps the USDA pyramid. [In Willett’s professional studies] women adhering most closely to the USDA guidelines suffer just 14% less heart disease than those who flout them. But those scoring highest on Willett’s scale suffer 28% less than those scoring the lowest. In every sample analyzed, the same pattern has held.” (Newsweek January 20, 2003)

What claim does Newsweek make?

What evidence does the author use to support this claim?

What assumptions does the author make?

What further comparisons would strengthen Newsweek’s claim?

Does the writing lead you to accept or reject the claim?