

Opinion

Social Sustainability, Social Capital, Health, and the Building of Cultural Capital around the Mediterranean Diet

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Abstract: The aim of this paper is to reflect on the importance of taking a broader and more comprehensive (and, above all, social and cultural) approach when problematizing dietary patterns in terms of sustainability. In this regard, the building of cultural capital around a medicalized concept such as the Mediterranean diet, in addition to being used to legitimize the actions carried out from the field of health, allows the highlighting of the value of social capital around this denomination. This article also analyzes how certain actions aimed at valuing the building of cultural capital related to the Mediterranean diet, such as the inscription as intangible cultural heritage of humanity by UNESCO, or the value recognition of the social capital constructed around them, have been frequently neglected and considered as subordinate to other perspectives considered more central and focused on both health and the environment.

Keywords: Mediterranean diet; social capital; cultural capital; sustainability; health



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Citation: Medina, F.-X.; Sole-Sedeno, J.M. Social Sustainability, Social Capital, Health, and the Building of Cultural Capital around the Mediterranean Diet. *Sustainability* **2023**, *15*, 4664. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su15054664>

Academic Editor: Jean Pierre Poulain

Received: 30 January 2023

Revised: 1 March 2023

Accepted: 6 March 2023

Published: 6 March 2023



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1. Introduction

The conceptual reflection on food systems is currently evolving and transforming at a dizzying pace in our societies. The demand for the “sustainability” of dietary patterns arose in the last decade as a public health challenge [1,2] and became part of the international debate on sustainability [3], food security and nutrition [4,5], and climate change [6]. There is also increasing evidence of the environmental cost of food production and consumption, and the cost to public health and, finally, society in general. The above assertion can even be corroborated within the framework of the guiding principles of the 2030 sustainable development agenda, the goals of which include the eradication of hunger and malnutrition, and global health (or planetary health).

This debate has also taken hold in the Mediterranean basin. In this area, one of the most important challenges is still food and nutritional security, but also, and increasingly, sustainability in relation to food, or more specifically, diets [3]; and—albeit in a secondary and peripheral way up to now—the ever-deferred debate linked to food culture and/or intangible heritage [7].

In this regard, it is important to highlight that to promote a transition towards more sustainable food systems, a holistic approach needs to be developed covering different spheres and areas: agriculture and food production; economy; society, culture, and lifestyles; the environment; climate change; nutrition and health, etc. Additionally, this is crucial if we are to develop effective intersectoral policy instruments that enable the sustainability of diets and food systems to be improved [8].

In this regard and considering the importance of sustainability on the international public agenda and in political discourse, initiatives in this area mostly seem to lean towards one, rather restrictive, approach, which gives priority to environmental aspects over other

areas that need to be considered within the sustainability paradigm, such as social and cultural aspects, which also play a main role in this whole scenario [9].

Given that food should be considered as a biopsychosocial phenomenon where nature and culture intersect [10], this paper proposes a reflection that reconsiders the importance of taking a broader and more comprehensive (and, above all, social and cultural) approach when problematizing dietary patterns in terms of sustainability. On the other hand, it analyzes how certain actions aimed at valuing the social capital, but also the building of cultural capital related to the Mediterranean diet, such as the inscription as intangible cultural heritage of humanity by UNESCO, have been frequently neglected and considered as subordinate to other perspectives considered more central and focused on both health and the environment.

The Mediterranean diet was inscribed by UNESCO in 2010 as intangible cultural heritage of humanity. The inscription emphasized the derivation of the concept “diet” from the Greek name: *diáita* (way of life), and was inscribed as a complex set of knowledge, rituals, traditions, and symbols involving food as a social and cultural fact. This idea of the Mediterranean diet includes landscapes, biodiversity, and health, but also (and mainly) sociocultural functions and values. In this regard, the aim of this paper is to reflect on the importance of taking a broader and more comprehensive sociocultural approach when problematizing dietary patterns in terms of sustainability. The building of cultural capital around a concept such as the Mediterranean diet, very related with health, allows the highlighting of the value of social and cultural capital around this denomination.

Following this premise, this article analyzes the building of cultural capital around the Mediterranean diet. In this regard, we must mention the inscription as intangible cultural heritage of humanity by UNESCO. In the lines that follow, we will review these and other aspects linked to the concepts of social capital, cultural capital, sustainability, and health using the construction of the concept of the Mediterranean diet as an axis of reflection.

2. Addressing Social Sustainability

A few decades ago, Stren and Polese [11] defined social sustainability as a kind of development that is compatible with the evolution of civil society. This compatibility involves a necessary coexistence or cohabitation between the environment (not only as a natural framework, but as a social context) and the culturally and socially diverse groups living in those contexts and needing improvements in the quality of life for all segments of the society(ies).

As Kandachar pointed out almost a decade ago, the term “Sustainability” has evolved during the last four decades to encompass three major aspects: social, economic, and environmental sustainability. During the same period, the word has focused, however, mainly on environmental and economic sustainability. In this regard, the neglected aspect: social sustainability, deserves urgent attention [12].

As indicated by Eizenberg and Jabareen [13], there is still a lack of theoretical and empirical studies on social sustainability. The literature has revealed that the “social” aspect has been integrated very late on into the debates on sustainable development and is therefore still one of the least explored aspects. As Bôto et al. [14] confirm, regarding their systematic review on the sustainability dimensions of the Mediterranean diet, only the economy was identified as a social sustainability factor, and only in very few of the studies they reviewed.

Eizenberg and Jabareen [13] suggest that the current situation regarding climate change, evidence of which has been available for some time, places us in a risk scenario that we need to tackle as societies. However, they also state that risk as a concept is part and parcel of sustainability and that, at the same time, these environmental risk conditions and their consequent uncertainties pose serious social, spatial, structural, and physical (we would also add cultural) threats for contemporary human societies and their living spaces.

These two authors affirm, from these initial premises, that within the framework of environmental sustainability, social sustainability is making efforts to address the risk whilst

at the same time addressing existing social concerns, which means that, without socially oriented practices, the efforts to achieve (environmental or any other type of) sustainability will be undermined, as there are too many gaps between the practice and the theory. From this perspective, they proposed a comprehensive conceptual framework for social sustainability, composed of four interrelated concepts, each one of which incorporates important social aspects. These are: equity (with economic restructuring, parity of participation and opportunities with significant public participation); security (with regard to existing risk); responsible production, from both an environmental and social viewpoint (here we would add labor rights, fair wages and salaries, work–life balance, etc.); and spaces and ways of life that promote a sense of belonging, community, security, health and attachment to place, among other environmental objectives.

In this way, social sustainability points towards the vital development of societies and specific social groups, with a focus on the coherence, strengthening, cohesion, and stability of the populations of which they are composed. The concept is principally (although not exclusively) applied to social sectors or disadvantaged or socially unprotected populations, seeking responsible and long-lasting management of existing and future resources. This ultimately implies ensuring that human activity does not compromise the environment, favoring the enduring permanence of human lifestyles and cultures. In this way, social sustainability and sustainable development share as a principle the idea that natural resources cannot be used irrationally. This would cause them to be exhausted. Additionally, given that human communities depend on access to these resources, guaranteeing their availability is a matter of vital importance.

Humans, as a species, cannot survive if they do not transition toward a sustainable practice of (food) production and consumption. However, in this same regard, we need also to consider that one type of sustainability (environmental) cannot take place without the other (social). As though we were looking at an image of Maslow's pyramid of needs, we see that human societies need to meet their own needs, in a particular order (following the same visual idea, as we meet our most basic needs, we develop needs and desires further up the pyramid), and all within the framework of their own internal contradictions. As authors such as Vallance [15] points out, it is only when people's basic needs are met that they can begin to actively address bio-physical environmental concerns. Furthermore, poverty is an important impediment to progress in this direction [16]. In this way, we recover some of the ideas put forward by Dempsey et al. (2011) [17], which include in their revision of social sustainability fundamental aspects such as lifestyles, traditions, or a sense of community and an attachment to said community. A similar idea is expressed by other authors [18] when they include in their analysis the concept of "tradition" linked both to the community and to sustainability itself.

3. Social Capital, Cultural Capital, and Social Sustainability

3.1. Social Capital and Social Sustainability

It is this more holistic and comprehensive conception of sustainability, approached from a social point of view, that most clearly incorporates the need to consider the existing social capital in relation to the different populations when addressing these kinds of subjects. Social capital is part of the umbrella of intellectual capital and may mean placing value on social interactions [19]. From this, there is a central idea: the presence of a set of norms and social networks as basic elements for collective actions for the benefit of the community [20].

As Bhandari and Yasunobu [21] point out, the notion of social capital is centered on social relationships, including social networks, reciprocity, civic engagement, and mutual trust. It is defined, following those authors, as a collective asset in the form of shared norms, values, beliefs, trust, networks, social relations, and institutions that facilitate cooperation and collective action for mutual benefit.

Social capital theory contends that social relationships are resources that can lead to the development and accumulation of human relationships [22]. As Schuller and Theisens [23] stressed also, the concept of social capital is often defined in terms of networks, emphasizing

the norm-laden nature of relationships within and between them. Following Woolcock [24], there exist three basic differentiations of types of social capital: (a) bonding social capital, which refers to relations within or between relatively homogenous groups; (b) bridging social capital, which refers to relationships within or between relatively homogenous groups; and (c) linking social capital, which refers to relationships between people or groups at different hierarchical levels. In this regard, networks that are strong on bonding but weak on bridging can be powerful knowledge creators within well-defined frameworks.

However, we also know that one important characteristic of social capital is its deployment of trust, implicit in almost any concept of community [23]. The importance of this collective trust is in its capacity to help members of the community of knowledge to assess and validate knowledge as it evolves. The same authors stressed that a community of knowledge draws on its members' collective experience and intelligence to decide which of the huge range of possible choices of knowledge is likely to be most favorable.

Following again Eizenberg and Jabareen [13], the efforts to achieve any kind of sustainability will be undermined without equity, security, responsible production, from both an environmental and social viewpoint (including labor rights, fair wages and salaries, work–life balance, etc.); and a sense of belonging and community. In this regard, social capital is strongly related to social sustainability, pointing towards development from a social perspective using networks of support and shared knowledge between individuals and groups, and with a focus on the coherence, strengthening, cohesion, and stability of the populations. The importance of social capital stressed by Schuller and Theisens [23] lies in collective trust, helping members of the community to assess and validate knowledge as it evolves. In this regard, and as Young [19] emphasizes also, it is, therefore, possible to create and manage communities to generate new knowledge, and innovative ideas. It may be that within the confines of a community, members interact with one another to create new knowledge and to analyze new ways to act or react. Therefore, the link between the two concepts of social capital and community needs to be emphasized, and also the way of the interaction with social sustainability can be understood.

3.2. *The Role of Cultural Capital*

Following French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's premises in his classic book *Distinction* [25], published in 1979, society members' behaviors are influenced by their own social class. Class members share normally a "habitus", that is, a common way of thinking and acting, and a similar amount of economic, social, and cultural capital. Cultural capital should imply aspects such as knowledge or skills [25]. Focusing specifically on food, Bourdieu argued that people's attempts to distinguish themselves from others by cultural elections and/or constructions could be reflected in food choices and preferences.

Bourdieu [26] stated, among many other key concepts, that 'cultural capital', which refers to cultural refinement, education, and command of high culture, is understood as the "legitimate culture" of the state or the prominent social groups. However, this cultural capital is a social construction within the group, and it also contributes elements of distinction to certain choices or cultural elements on which it acts. In this way, and beyond the social class, these elements are built based on certain elements of added cultural values, through which, allegedly, they would eventually benefit.

However, following Throsby [27], cultural capital is, basically, an asset embodying cultural value. On the other hand, and as Bennett et al. point out, it is important to stress that cultural capital implies the conviction of the existence and effectiveness of traditions in both high and popular culture. Furthermore, this assumption generates a sense of identity and belonging [28].

4. The Mediterranean Diet as a Social, Cultural, and Sustainable Framework

4.1. Is the Mediterranean Diet a Sustainable Diet?

As indicated by Dernini et al. [29], the incorporation of issues related to sustainability in the international agri-food and nutrition agendas has become increasingly evident during the last decade. However: what is a sustainable diet?

As highlighted by the FAO in today's most widely accepted definition of sustainable diets, defined at its head offices in Rome during the International Scientific Symposium "Biodiversity and Sustainable Diets. United against Hunger": "Sustainable diets are protective and respectful of biodiversity and ecosystems, culturally acceptable, accessible, economically fair and affordable; nutritionally adequate, safe and healthy; while optimizing natural and human resources" [3]. In this regard, the concept of sustainable diets recognizes the interdependence between food production, food consumption, food needs, and nutritional recommendations and, at the same time, expresses the notion that the food system (including production, distribution and consumption, health, economic and social and cultural aspects, among others) cannot operate outside the ecosystem [29].

On the other hand, we also know that interest in the Mediterranean diet as a sustainable dietary pattern has grown in recent times [3,4,30]. The concept of the Mediterranean diet shows a remarkable evolution over the last six decades, from that of a healthy coronary pattern to the current model of a sustainable diet [29], and including culture as an intermediate phase, with the Mediterranean diet being recognized as "Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity" by UNESCO [7]. In this respect, various authors affirm that the Mediterranean diet, a plant-based diet with low consumption of animal products, has a lower environmental impact than other dietary patterns and, consequently, has a smaller water footprint and lower greenhouse gas emissions compared to other current dietary patterns, with lower energy consumption and land use [3,29–33].

However, although some experts also agree that the Mediterranean diet as a model should provide greater environmental benefits in the Mediterranean region, characterized by growing water scarcity [34], it is also the case that Mediterranean diets (in plural, and applied to the different cultural and regional expressions of said dietary model) are not standardized, and of course are not all equal in terms of environmental sustainability. For example, as indicated by Aboussaleh et al. [35], countries in the north eastern Mediterranean have a bigger per annum and per capita water footprint (2279 m³) than the countries of North Africa (1892 m³), the Balkans (1708 m³), and the Middle East (1656 m³). The urban–rural dichotomy or the socio-economic differences between the countries in the region also play an important role which need to be considered. The water footprint, for example, varies a great deal between the different countries in the region. Approximately 91% of the region's water footprint is due to the production and consumption of agricultural products and their by-products [36], including production related to biofuels and animal feed. In this way, the increased demand for food has a direct effect on the volume of water used for irrigation.

Following Tomé [37], we have that these processes are important in countries or regions that are significantly transforming their agri-food production and their relationship between society and environment to satisfy a global request for different basic foods of the Mediterranean diet. Thus, the medical-nutritional recommendation of olive oil and its identification as a basic food of the Mediterranean diet basket, joined with other different but related factors, has increased olive oil production. In Spain, this fact has been achieved in two ways: expanding the fields dedicated to olive groves, and watering the previously existing ones (Tomé, 2021) [37]. This growth is making an increasing number of Andalusian municipalities depend on single-crop farming, with all the related risks and effects.

We have to say also that these kinds of problems have become especially evident in recent times, such as the increasingly frequent droughts experienced by Spain and other Mediterranean countries (France, Italy, etc.) already important in the beginning of the year 2022 [38] and whose latest and hardest manifestation, at the time of writing these lines, has been during the summer of 2022.

4.2. Sustainability and Sociocultural Aspects: The Mediterranean Area as a Context

This sustainability, so widely demanded today, has a social and cultural dimension in addition to its environmental interests. The intended lower environmental impact based on aspects such as more seasonal consumption of fresh and local products, or the diversity of local food products, together with other aspects also called for, such as traditional dishes and conviviality, are also the cornerstone of Mediterranean diet heritage conservation, as acknowledged by UNESCO in 2010.

Up to now, the Mediterranean diet has mainly been seen as a model of healthy behavior based on medical recommendations. In this regard, nevertheless, we must be very careful extending along time the virtues of the different diets that have historically converged in the Mediterranean basin, as different authors have remarked when talking about historical evolution of food systems or nutritional transition [39,40].

Following its recognition as intangible cultural heritage by UNESCO (2010–2013), and despite the importance of the health visions, the Mediterranean diet is increasingly being seen as an intrinsic part of Mediterranean cultures, with the concept being reformulated to treat it as equivalent to a Mediterranean food system or Mediterranean culinary system [29,41]. Thus, the “Mediterranean Diet” was inscribed on the UNESCO Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity as: “a set of skills, knowledge, practices, and traditions ranging from the landscape to the table, including the crops, harvesting, fishing, conservation, processing, preparation and, particularly, consumption of food [...]. This unique lifestyle determined by the climate and Mediterranean landscape is also expressed through associated festivities and celebrations” [42].

Furthermore, through its social and cultural functions, the Mediterranean diet embodies landscapes, natural resources, and associated occupations, and the fields of health, wellbeing, creativity, intercultural dialogue, and, at the same time, values such as hospitality or communal living, sustainability, and biodiversity [43].

In this sense, we can see how in the case of the Mediterranean diet, conceived since the mid-20th century as a healthy dietary model, there has been a change of course from the beginning of this century, building an important cultural capital around it. This recently built cultural capital must be understood, not as a class concept in Bourdieu’s sense (although certain elements of its construction also refer us to certain class elements through the enhancement of the good), but as the search of cultural elements that come to justify, on the one hand, the traditionality and cultural and historical depth of the element, acknowledged by UNESCO, as explained by Bennett et al. [28]. On the other hand, that can help to further strengthen its elements related to health—elements which, in the case of the Mediterranean diet, are seen as central and inescapable.

5. Mediterranean Diet, Culture, Locality, and Social Capital

5.1. Mediterranean Diet, Social Landscapes, Lifestyles, and Sustainability

The Mediterranean diet as a concept, aims to cover health, sustainability, biodiversity, quality, and culture. Safeguarding the Mediterranean diet should therefore be the driver of responsible and sustainable consumption. Equally, from a local Mediterranean perspective, and as a regional consumption model, Mediterranean food and diets (in plural) could become a sustainable resource for the Mediterranean basin, in terms of local consumption.

In this regard, and picking up the initial thread of this section, we see that no environmental sustainability (or public health) concept can be understood without considering the social dimension. Equally, as pointed out by Moser [44], sustainability should be seen as a development model that is ecologically viable but also socially just and economically competitive, within which all activity should be sustainable.

It should be said that these views do not consider, for example, aspects such as the sustainability or environmental footprint of transporting certain products to be consumed far from the place where they are produced. Consumption, as part of the Mediterranean diet, cannot be separated from production, distribution, legislation, economics, and other social and cultural factors that have historically been constructed around food in the

Mediterranean region. In this regard, the Mediterranean diet is not simply a group of healthy nutrients, but rather a complex web of interdependent cultural aspects that range from nutrition to economics and include law, history, politics, and even religion. This point of view must, without a doubt, be underscored in future debates on food sustainability and the Mediterranean diet, its prospects, and challenges.

Nevertheless, the Spanish anthropologist Pedro Tomé (2021) [37], reflecting on the recent transformations of the Mediterranean cultural landscapes in Spain, says that the patrimonialization, popularization, and globalization of a certain conception of the Mediterranean diet have turned it into a de-territorialized global phenomenon where the continuity of certain cultural landscapes linked to local knowledge and particular lifestyles has been broken, replacing them with agro-industrial landscapes exclusively at the service of production. This, at the same time, has caused social and environmental inequalities [37].

In this regard, it is apparent that the Mediterranean landscapes that produce the basic goods of the Mediterranean diet are being subjected to a type of agro-industrial pressure that should be not compatible with the diet, the lifestyle, and the landscapes inscribed by UNESCO.

5.2. Mediterranean Diet, Culture, and Social Capital

Being acknowledged in 2010 (and enlarged in 2013) by UNESCO as intangible cultural heritage of humanity, the Mediterranean diet, far away from “healthy” arguments, was inscribed in the UNESCO’s Representative List as follows: “The Mediterranean Diet, from the Greek word ‘*díaita*’, ‘diet’ means ‘way of life—lifestyle, a set of skills, knowledge, rituals, symbols, and traditions, ranging from the landscape to the table. Eating together is the foundation of the cultural identity and continuity of communities throughout the Mediterranean basin. The Mediterranean diet emphasizes values of hospitality, neighborliness, intercultural dialogue and creativity, and a way of life guided by respect for diversity” [42].

As we can literally read in the inscription by UNESCO, the “Mediterranean diet embodies landscapes, natural resources, biodiversity, and associated occupations as well as the fields of health, welfare, creativity, intercultural dialogue and, at the same time, social and cultural functions, and values such as hospitality, commensality, or conviviality” [29]. From this perspective and after the inscription, concepts such as commensality or conviviality (eating together, as the inscription literally remarks), created after a cultural perspective of food, began to be a focus of attention of academics, and started to be a part (in some way) of the definitions and applications of the Mediterranean diet [45].

As Dernini et al. (2016) [29] point out, the Mediterranean diet must imply a local sustainable diet in every agri-ecological Mediterranean area, always taking into account the regional variations and country specificities within the Mediterranean region. From this basis, they identify four sustainability dimensions of the Mediterranean diet: health, environment, sociocultural, and economic. Moreover, from this multidimensional approach, they can identify four general benefits: improvements in health and nutrition, low environmental impact and maintenance of biodiversity, greater attention to lifestyles and the sociocultural importance of food, and positive economic implications at the local level [29].

In this regard, the links between cultural aspects and food sustainability are pointed out. Among them, in the cultural part, the importance of conviviality around food, the shared knowledge, and, from this starting point, the establishment of social capital around food, placing value on social interactions [19] and social networks [23]. Following this premise, family and communal meals are a moment of conviviality and importance, and a daily or frequent opportunity for communication and social exchange and relationship. On the other hand, authors such as Truzzi et al. (2020) [46] include commensality as an aspect linked also to sustainability. The social interaction promoted by the Mediterranean diet gives rise to an important body of cultural habits deeply rooted in a local area, actively protecting biodiversity, and ensuring the conservation and development of traditional activities. This is, from our perspective, social capital created from a cultural basis.

Thus, beyond nutrition and in the framework of social and cultural aspects, conviviality related to food plays in favor of social interaction, circulation of knowledge, and establishment of social networks. This is in favor of the creation of social capital.

6. Conclusions

Food is a complex field, which involves multiple visions, interests, disciplines, and needs for analysis. As we have seen throughout this article, in the field of food (but not only in this specific field) we need broader and more comprehensive approaches when problematizing dietary patterns in significative terms such as health or sustainability.

Throughout this text, we have reviewed and reflected on the importance of taking into account a broader social and cultural vision when we discuss food systems in terms of sustainability. The social perspectives and the building of cultural capital around a concept such as the Mediterranean diet allows us to broaden the concept of sustainability, making it more holistic. A concept, thus, is observed as a series of interlinked structures that create the bridges we need between sociocultural and environmental concerns.

In this regard, we reflected on the inscription as intangible cultural heritage of humanity by UNESCO as a construction of cultural capital around a concept clearly related to health. The Mediterranean diet has traveled an important path in recent decades that has taken it from a solely medical consideration to the current need to include the concept of (and action on) sustainability, through the previous and important sanction of culture and society. The building of cultural capital around a strongly medicalized concept such as the Mediterranean diet (and in addition to being used to legitimize the actions carried out from the field of health), allows the highlighting of the value of social capital around this denomination.

In this regard, the importance of conviviality highlighted in the inscription by UNESCO, the shared knowledge, and, from this starting point, the significative construction of social capital around food, placing value on the building of social networks and social interactions, acquiring a leading role that cannot be neglected, and that also influences all spaces, actors, and moments in the food chain.

The efforts to achieve environmental sustainability will be undermined without equity, security, and responsible production, from both environmental and social points of view. On the other hand, a sense of belonging and community is needed. Social capital builds social contact and interaction, and the building of networks that allow a common way of life. However, social capital means also collective trust, implicit in almost any concept of group or community. Additionally, this collective trust helps people to evolve as a group.

Thus, social capital and social sustainability are strongly related, promoting an integrated development that allows for more open and inclusive visions. In this regard, the social interaction promoted by the Mediterranean diet as an open and integrative concept can give rise to an important body of cultural local knowledge, ensuring the conservation and promotion of both biodiversity and the development of traditional activities. Furthermore, this also increases social capital, created from shared knowledge, social interactions, and the enhancement of the cultural elements at stake.

Nevertheless, we must be aware that the social and cultural spheres have been until now subordinated to others considered more central and important: health, mainly, to which today the environment has been added with unusual force. The building of cultural capital related to the Mediterranean diet, such as the inscription as intangible cultural heritage of humanity by UNESCO, or the value recognition of the social capital constructed around them, have been frequently neglected and considered as subordinate. Moreover, this fact has not changed despite UNESCO's inscription on its Representative List of Intangible Cultural Heritage, nor the claim for more open, multidimensional, and less restrictive visions.

Although the concept of the Mediterranean diet has undergone an interesting transformation in recent decades, the perspectives created and developed with the Mediterranean diet from different academic disciplines continue to show specific interests and to pose im-

portant problems for a truly holistic approach. More and deeper interpretations are needed from a sociocultural point of view, considering the importance of those perspectives that are built from the interaction of people as members of societies and that, therefore, create social capital. These aspects are the only ones that can efficiently pool shared knowledge and make it evolve in a useful and collective way.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, F.-X.M. and J.M.S.-S.; formal analysis, F.-X.M.; writing—original draft preparation, F.-X.M. and J.M.S.-S.; writing—review and editing, F.-X.M. and J.M.S.-S. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: Not applicable.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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