

## A Biographical Study of Food Choice Capacity: Standards, Circumstances, and Food Management Skills

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### ABSTRACT

**Objective:** Conceptual understanding of how management of food and eating is linked to life course events and experiences.

**Design/Setting:** Individual qualitative interviews with adults in upstate New York.

**Participants:** Fourteen men and 11 women with moderate to low incomes.

**Phenomenon:** Food choice capacity.

**Analysis:** Constant comparative method.

**Results:** A conceptual model of food choice capacity emerged. Food choice capacity represented participants' confidence in meeting their standards for food and eating given their food management skills and circumstances. Standards (expectations for how participants felt they should eat) were based on life course events and experiences. Food management skills (mental and physical talents to keep food costs down and prepare meals) were sources of self-esteem for many participants. Most participants had faced challenging and changing circumstances (income, employment, social support, roles, health conditions). Participants linked strong food management skills with high levels of food choice capacity, except in the case of extreme financial circumstances or the absence of strong standards.

**Implications for Research and Practice:** Recognizing people's experiences and perspectives in food choice is important. Characterizing food management skills as durable, adaptive resources positions them conceptually for researchers and in a way that practitioners can apply in developing programs for adults.

**KEY WORDS:** qualitative, biographical, life course, food choice, capacity, food management, cooking, food shopping

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### INTRODUCTION

Health professionals and policy makers assume that people should be able to adopt recommended food practices and maintain these behaviors over a lifetime. Yet individual lives are embedded in cultural, social, economic, psychological, and biological forces that may be stable or dynamic, resulting in life course trajectories, turning points, or transitions that can enhance or impede the adoption of recommended practices.<sup>1,2</sup> Although the roles of life course events and experiences in shaping food choice are recognized,<sup>3-6</sup> the processes by which these influence management of food and eating need to be better understood to provide insight for nutrition practice.<sup>7</sup>

The management of food and eating involves a combination of physical and mental processes as one transforms materials from the food supply to meet one's biological, psychological, and social needs and those of the household.<sup>8,9</sup> Food provisioning involves food acquisition, storage, preparation, cooking, service, and disposal of foods,<sup>10</sup> as well as organization and coordination of time, tasks, and household eating schedules.<sup>11</sup> Attentiveness to the microsocioal system of the household is required because food and eating are central to domestic harmony.<sup>8,12</sup> Food management processes rely heavily on tradition but are also open to individual innovation and improvisation.<sup>8,9,13-15</sup>

Few researchers have focused on the role of life course events and experiences in shaping how adults manage food and eating.<sup>6,16-18</sup> Researchers have examined the management of daily food activities from other perspectives, such as gender roles,<sup>8,11-13,19-21</sup> household processes,<sup>22,23</sup> socioeconomic status,<sup>24</sup> food security,<sup>25</sup> aging,<sup>26-28</sup> and decision making.<sup>29,30</sup>

The term *capacity* refers to one's abilities to achieve certain goals and has been used to characterize groups and organizations as well as individuals.<sup>31-34</sup> Capacity is also related to "self-efficacy," defined as the "beliefs in one's capabilities to

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organize and execute the courses of action required to produce given attainments.”<sup>35</sup>

The goal of this study was to develop conceptual understanding of how life course events and experiences shape adults' management of food and eating. The study drew on the Food Choice Process Model's<sup>36</sup> concept of the “personal food system,” the mental process that people construct for everyday food activities. The study examined how a sample of adults linked their current personal systems for managing food and eating to their past lives.

The constructionist research approach used in this study acknowledges multiple views of reality and tries to understand how the participants construct reality.<sup>37-41</sup> The findings result from an inseparable relationship between the participants' experiences and understanding as interpreted by the researchers. The study used a grounded theory approach<sup>38,42</sup> because it examined the topic of interest from the perspectives of the study participants. It was also theory oriented<sup>43</sup> in that it linked emergent findings to existing theoretical perspectives (life course and food choice) as it sought to build new conceptualizations.

## METHODS

Twenty-five adults completed 60- to 75-minute, in-depth, qualitative interviews conducted by a trained and experienced interviewer. Participants lived and worked in a rural-urban region in upstate New York. They were purposively sampled to vary in gender, age, ethnicity, marital status, living arrangements, and ways of eating. Participants with moderate to low incomes were sought for this study because the high risk that this population faces for nutrition-related health problems makes them a common target audience for community nutrition interventions. Participants were recruited through employers of low-wage workers and community agencies serving the targeted population using posted flyers and contact with key informants. Recruitment advertisements in local newspapers and snowball sampling through participants provided additional volunteers. Researchers continuously reviewed the characteristics of participants to guide the recruitment of later participants. Sample extensiveness<sup>44</sup> was deemed to be sufficient when new participants yielded no additional insights and theoretical saturation was reached.<sup>42</sup>

The 14 men and 11 women participants provided a diversity of ages, household compositions, marital status, and education levels (Table). About 80% were white. Most participants had grown up in the local area, but a few had experienced living in other states and countries. Participants shopped for food at various types of stores, including large supermarkets and local natural food stores. Some participants were very interested in food or accomplished in the kitchen, whereas others said that “eating is something I simply have to do.”

The interviewer used a semistructured interview guide with follow-up probes to explore participants' current eat-

ing habits and personal food systems, attitudes and beliefs about food and health, and memories and perceptions about these same constructs at earlier times in their lives. Life stages particularly probed were childhood, teenage years, first living on own, marriage, birth of children, separation, and divorce. Interview questions included the following: *What were meals like when you were growing up? First out on your own? First married? Divorced, etc? What foods were eaten? What were the*

Table. Characteristics of Study Participants (n = 25)

Characteristics	Participants (n)
Age (yr)	
24-29	3
30-39	7
40-49	8
50-59	6
60-62	1
Gender	
Male	14
Female	11
Race/ethnicity	
White, non-Hispanic	19
White, Hispanic	1
Black, non-Hispanic	5
Marital status	
Never married	8
Married	3
Divorced/separated	14
Household composition	
One adult, no children	12
Two or more adults, no children	6
One adult and at least 1 child	4
Two adults and at least 1 child	3
Educational level	
High school graduate	9
Some college/postsecondary	6
Four yr college degree	5
More than 4 yr college	5
Annual household income	
Under \$10 000	3
\$10 000-19 999	8
\$21 000-60 000	8
More than \$60 000	2
Area of residence	
Urban	10
Semirural	8
Rural	7
Employment	
Full time	22
Part time	1
Not employed	2

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