

Research Report

Why do women of low socioeconomic status have poorer dietary behaviours than women of higher socioeconomic status? A qualitative exploration

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Abstract

In developed countries, persons of low socioeconomic status (SES) are generally less likely to consume diets consistent with dietary guidelines. Little is known about the mechanisms that underlie SES differences in eating behaviours. Since women are often responsible for dietary choices within households, this qualitative study investigated factors that may contribute to socioeconomic inequalities in dietary behaviour among women. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 19 high-, 19 mid- and 18 low- SES women, recruited from Melbourne, Australia, using an area-level indicator of SES. An ecological framework, in which individual, social and environmental level influences on diet were considered, was used to guide the development of interview questions and interpretation of the data. Thematic analysis was undertaken to identify the main themes emerging from the data. Several key influences varied by SES. These included food-related values such as health consciousness, and a lack of time due to family commitments (more salient among higher SES women), as well as perceived high cost of healthy eating and lack of time due to work commitments (more important for low SES women). Reported availability of and access to good quality healthy foods did not differ strikingly across SES groups. Public health strategies aimed at reducing SES inequalities in diet might focus on promoting healthy diets that are low cost, as well as promoting time-efficient food preparation strategies for all women.

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Introduction

Compared with those of low socioeconomic status (SES), individuals of high SES tend to follow a diet that is more in line with dietary guidelines for health. For example, lower SES individuals are more likely to consume diets high in fat, low in micronutrient density, and to have lower intakes of fruit and vegetables (Davey Smith & Brunner, 1997; Giskes, Turrell, Patterson, & Newman, 2002a; Mishra, Ball, Arbuckle, & Crawford, 2002; Smith & Baghurst, 1993). As a result, studies repeatedly find that people of low SES groups possess nutrient intakes and dietary patterns that

increase the risk of diet-related disease and overall health inequalities (Kaplan & Keil, 1993; Turrell & Mathers, 2000).

A focus on SES and women's diets is important for a number of reasons. Firstly, the diets of women are qualitatively and quantitatively different from those of men. For example, women's diets are usually more consistent with dietary guidelines, with women more likely to report that they purchase, prepare, cook and consume food that is considered healthier (Steele, Dobson, Alexander, & Russell, 1991; Turrell, 1997; Worsley, 2002). In addition, despite increased participation in the labour market in recent years, women are still largely responsible for the provision of food in households (Lester, 1994). A 'carer role' played by women may see them adopt the role of food gatekeeper, a responsibility that is especially evident in families with children (Coveney, 2002). Hence many women are likely to be responsible not only for their own diets, but also for those of their families.

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Even though SES differences in diet are relatively well documented, little is known about the mechanisms underlying the SES-diet differentials amongst women. Studies on the correlates on dietary behaviour have collectively identified a range of individual, social and environmental influences on eating. However, the extent to which each of these influences varies by SES, and whether SES differentials in some or all of these influences explain SES variations in women's dietary behaviours, remains relatively unexplored. Evidence on the key influences on eating behaviours and diet is summarised briefly below.

Individual influences on diet include taste, knowledge, beliefs and values, and self-efficacy. Information is limited in relation as to whether taste preferences vary by SES. One Australian study by Giskes et al. (Giskes, Turrell, Patterson, & Newman, 2002b) found that taste preference as a perceived barrier for fruit and vegetable intake did not vary by household income. A number of studies have found evidence that nutrition knowledge differs significantly between socio-demographic groups, with poorer knowledge among those of lower SES (Buttriss, 1997; Crawford & Baghurst, 1990; Hansbro, Bridgwood, Morgan, & Hickman, 1997; Parmenter, Waller, & Wardle, 2000). The beliefs and values applied when making food choices have also been shown to differ by SES, with middle class mothers more likely than mothers of lower SES to limit foods considered unhealthy, both in their own and their children's diets (Hupkens, Knibbe, & Drop, 2000).

It is increasingly recognised that choices in relation to food and eating behaviours are not solely individual matters, unconstrained by social and environmental influences. The general social circumstances of peoples' lives are likely to influence their eating behaviours (Dowler, 2001). Past research indicates that when people eat alone, levels of food consumption tend to be lower than when people eat with others or in a group setting (Nestle, Wing, Birch, DiSogra, Drewnowski and Middleton, 1998). Family and friends may also be a source of role modeling and peer pressure for consuming higher-fat foods or for trying new foods (Nestle et al., 1998). Within families, women's own food intakes may be negatively influenced as they often sacrifice their own food preferences for those of other family members, particularly their children (Charles & Kerr, 1988; Lupton, 2000; Santich, 1995). In addition, meals have become less traditional as social trends develop by which women are increasingly participants in the workplace (Lester, 1994).

As well as social environmental influences, diet is likely to be influenced by factors in the physical environment. Evidence suggests that the cost and accessibility of food in the local neighbourhood, and the physical environment where households are located influence people's eating behaviours (Dowler, 2001), although little research has investigated these issues (Diez Roux, 2000; 2003; Morland, Wing, & Diez Roux, 2002; Sooman, Macintyre, & Anderson, 1993a,b). Emerging evidence suggests that access to quality fruit, vegetables and other fresh foods in

the local environment is poorer in areas of lower SES, and that people of low SES are more reliant on smaller shops where food prices are often higher than those in large supermarkets (Sooman, Macintyre, & Anderson, 1993a,b). However, a recent Australian study examining food purchasing behaviour found that areas of varying SES did not appear to differ on the basis of food availability, accessibility, or affordability (Turrell, Blakely, Patterson, & Oldenburg, 2004). Cost is a strong influence on food purchases (Cox, Anderson, Lean, & Mela, 1998; Drewnowski, 2003; Quan, Salomon, Nitzke, & Reicks, 2000; Sooman, Macintyre, & Anderson, 1993a,b) and given that persons of low SES often have more limited budgets, healthier foods such as fruit and vegetables may be overlooked in favour of less healthy, more energy-dense options (Drewnowski & Specter, 2004; Giskes et al., 2002a).

In summary, individual, social and environmental factors influence women's eating behaviours and diet. There is evidence that some of these influences are socio-economically patterned. However, whether socioeconomic variations in these factors, explain SES differences in women's diets is presently not known. The aim of this study was to investigate why women from low SES groups have poorer dietary behaviours (for example, more frequently consume foods high in fat, such as takeaway foods, and less frequently consume fruits and vegetables), than women from higher SES groups. The study used an ecological perspective (Stokols, 1992), taking into account the social and environmental supports and constraints on individual choices and behaviour.

Methods

Study design

Face-to-face interviews were used to obtain an understanding of the women's personal knowledge, beliefs, eating attitudes and behaviours, and their perceptions of the social and environmental influences on these. Since this is a relatively unexplored area, a qualitative approach was considered most appropriate (Hudelson, 1996). A semi-structured interview format was used to capitalize on the richness of the women's responses while allowing the researcher to gain as complete and detailed an understanding as possible of the topic at hand. The Deakin University Human Research Ethics Committee approved the study.

Selection of participants

For logistical reasons, the study was restricted to a geographical area within 25 km of the Melbourne central business district. Based on 1996 Census data, the Australian Bureau of Statistics has assigned a SEIFA (Socioeconomic Index for Areas) score, a measure of the area's relative

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