



The photo-elicitation of food worlds: A study on the eating behaviors of low socioeconomic Chilean women



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ABSTRACT

Traditional methods for studying eating behaviors include quantitative methods such as 24-h dietary recalls or food frequency questionnaires. Recently, visual methods such as photo-elicitation (PE) have been recognized as useful for studying and understanding eating behaviors. PE has been defined as the use of images during an interview. The goals of this study are to demonstrate the potential of PE for exploring the eating behaviors of Chilean women of low socioeconomic status and to show the advantages and disadvantages of PE from the participants' points of view. The study included 31 participants who were asked to take pictures that represented what they considered important to them in their "food world". The pictures were developed and participants were invited to participate in an individual interview. Participants were able to talk about their eating behaviors and those of their families, the factors influencing those behaviors, their dietary knowledge and skills, and their reflections on their diet using the photographs. PE proved to be a feasible research technique for the studied population, and was well received and enjoyed by the participants. The participants perceived a few barriers with PE, such as forgetting to take pictures or not having ideas for new pictures. Nevertheless, PE allowed researchers to obtain rich information about eating behaviors, and can therefore be a useful method for working with populations of underserved areas. The PE data that this study collected could be used to create or improve interventions promoting healthy eating within the studied population.

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1. Introduction

Eating behaviors—especially those constituting an unhealthy diet (i.e., increased intake of food with high amounts of fat, salt, and sugars, and low amounts of vitamins and minerals [World Health Organization (WHO), 2016])—have been noted as a "major modifiable determinant of chronic disease" (WHO & Food and Agriculture Organization, 2003, p. 2). In order to implement better health interventions, many researchers are interested in understanding why people consume unhealthy diets.

Traditionally, both quantitative and qualitative methods have been used in the study of eating behaviors. Quantitative methods, such as food frequency questionnaires or 24-h dietary recalls, allow researchers to ascertain what and how much a person is eating, but

these instruments do not lead to in-depth information that explains the complex personal and social factors that contribute to individuals' eating behaviors. Although qualitative methods, such as focus groups and interviews, have proven useful for studying questions about "the how and the why of certain behaviors" (Hargreaves, Schlundt, & Buchowski, 2002, p. 560), they are limited when it comes to understanding specific patterns of nutrient intake.

Researchers have recently begun experimenting with alternative methods of studying eating behaviors. Visual methods, especially, enable researchers to explore a diverse range of health issues (Pain, 2012). Visual methods are defined as the use of any kind of visual material in a research study, such as videos, pictures, drawings, and images. Researchers or participants can compose these visual tools, or they can consist of previously existing materials (Banks, 2001). Visual strategies have been used to complement traditional qualitative research, offering several benefits including:

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obtaining information from participants' perspectives on multiple and diverse aspects of their lives, promoting more detailed communication and/or explanation of participants' ideas and feelings, fostering greater connection and interaction between researchers and participants, among other benefits (Pain, 2012). Visual methods can also complement quantitative research approaches. For instance, in the food and nutrition field, Keller, Fleury, and Rivera (2007) argue that visual methods can yield more information about portion sizes, food purchases, and preparation patterns. In summary, researchers tend to use visual methods for two reasons: to enhance data collection and presentation, and to improve the relationship between the participant and the researcher (Pain, 2012).

Photo-elicitation (PE) is a visual method that has attracted researchers in sociology, education, and health, among other fields (Rose, 2012). When utilizing this method, members of a community take photographs relating to a particular theme, and then discuss the photographs and theme during interviews (Gubrium & Harper, 2013; Rose, 2012). PE has been described as “a photograph into the research interview,” which can lead to a better understanding of the participants' worlds (Lorenz & Kolb, 2009, p. 263). This method considers pictures as records of reality, and as sources of information that can be used to thoughtfully answer a research question (Rose, 2012). According to Rose (2012), pictures introduce several complex elements to the interview process, including the context in which they were created. Some authors argue that pictures are important not only for what they are, but also for “what it is that visual methods are able to achieve” (Knowles & Sweetman, 2004, p. 6).

The use of PE has extended to studies of eating behaviors. So far, most studies include women as participants (Johnson, Sharkey, & Dean, 2011; Johnson, Sharkey, McIntosh, & Dean, 2010; Keller et al., 2007) and focus on food choice. For example, Johnson, Sharkey, & Dean (2011) studied the food choices of Mexican mothers, which were heavily influenced by their children. The same group of researchers studied the influence of matrilineal family members on families' food choices (Johnson et al., 2010). Lachal et al. (2012) used PE to understand the role of food in obese adolescents' family life. Throughout these and other studies, pictures have been considered a reliable source of information to complement the study of eating behaviors because they provide information about these habits that cannot be obtained with traditional methods of assessing food and nutrient intake (Husby, Heitmann, & O'Doherty Jensen, 2009).

Using PE to study eating behaviors can be especially effective in interventions targeting populations of low socioeconomic status or those that are underserved, which are groups where the rates of obesity are higher (Álvarez-Castaño, Goez-Rueda, & Carreño-Aguirre, 2012). For example, in Chile—a middle upper-income country, according to WHO (2011)—30.7% of the population of those over 15 years of age suffer from obesity. When this prevalence is examined according to socioeconomic level, studies show that it is higher in lower socioeconomic groups (35.5%). This situation is worse among women from low socioeconomic groups, whose prevalence of obesity reaches 46.7% (Ministerio de Salud de Chile, 2010). This could mean that this group of the population is more likely to be engaging in unhealthy diets.

Previous studies using PE to target underserved women in the United States have achieved favorable results (see Balbale, Schwingel, Chodzko-Zajko, & Huhman, 2014; Johnson, Sharkey, & Dean, 2011; Keller et al., 2007; Sebastião, Gálvez, Bobitt, Adamson, & Schwingel, 2016), indicating that PE is a promising method for studying eating behaviors within this demographic group. It is also important to note that the social benefits of working with women extend beyond merely improving the health status of individuals; women are important in society for their productive and

reproductive roles, but also for their consumer and healthcare provider roles. Women are more frequently in charge of the food purchasing and have an important role in modulating the home food environment (Byrd-Bredbenner, Abbot, & Cussler, 2011). In many countries like Chile, women act as the primary caregivers of their children, play important roles as housewives, and exert significant influence on the behavior of other family members (Chadwick, Crawford, & Ly, 2013).

The current research intends to contribute to the nutrition and behavioral field, giving novel data about the potential of PE for researching eating behaviors beyond the study of food choice. This study intends to work toward filling this gap by pursuing the following goals: (1) to explore what kind of dietary information can be gathered using PE in a group of women of low socioeconomic status, and (2) to report on the advantages and disadvantages of PE, as perceived by the participants.

2. Materials and methods

2.1. Participants and sampling

Participants of this study included 31 native Chilean women who had at least one child younger than 12 years old, and who were living with a partner. All participants were living in low socioeconomic urban neighborhoods in Santiago, as defined by the Social Priority Index [Índice de Prioridad Social] (Secretaría Regional Ministerial de Desarrollo Social- Gobierno de Chile, 2014). This index is defined by five categories, based on variables such as income and the education level of people in each neighborhood; these variables determine the level of vulnerability, ranging from “high priority” to “no priority”. Our research was conducted in five neighborhoods; three were high priority and two were middle-high priority neighborhoods. The socio-demographic characteristics of the participants can be found in Table 1.

A purposive sampling method was used in this study. This method allowed for a wide selection of participants, which supplied the study with a sufficient variety of participant perspectives and information (Kratwohl, 2009). More than 50 women who met the inclusion criteria (aged 25–50 years old, had at least one child less than 12 years of age, and lived with a partner) were invited to participate. They were invited through face-to-face contact in waiting rooms at public health care centers or community

Table 1
Socio-demographic and health characteristics of participants (n = 31).

Characteristic	Value
Age in years (mean ± SD)	36.2 ± 6.3
Educational attainment (%)	
Less than 12th grade	10
High School	64.5
Technical	22.6
College	3.2
Work status (%)	
Unemployed	61.3
Monthly household income (US\$ per capita) (mean ± SD)	166 ± 124.3
Kind of health insurance (%)	
Public	90.3
Presence of chronic disease (%)	
Yes	35.5
Any kind of aerobic exercise (%)	
No	74.2
Any kind of resistant exercise (%)	
No	96.8
Nutritional Status (%)	
Normal weight	29
Overweight	48.4
Obese	22.6

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