



Remembering food insecurity: Low-income parents' perspectives on childhood experiences and implications for measurement



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ABSTRACT

The objective of this study was to explore how low-income parents recall and describe childhood experiences with food insecurity. Little is known about how adults remember food insecurity experienced in childhood, yet there are potential implications for subsequent behavior including parents' willingness and ability to adopt recommended child feeding practices. To guide development of a measure of previous childhood food insecurity for research and screening purposes, we conducted interviews exploring parents' emic perspectives on these early life course experiences and reactions to potential survey items. A diverse group of 27 low-income mothers in New York State was interviewed in depth; data were coded and analyzed qualitatively for emergent themes. In recounting childhood memories, participants expressed strong emotions and strove to portray their parents positively, emphasizing that parents did their best to ensure that children "always had something to eat." Rather than dwell on food insecurity, participants preferred to share memories of family strategies to mitigate food shortages (e.g., asking relatives for money, "stretching" meals). Participants' memories of these strategies to increase food access and acceptability and adequacy of meals were summarized in a framework integrating key themes. The emotional salience of childhood food insecurity memories suggests that these experiences could have significant implications for parental adoption of child feeding recommendations and should be considered when designing nutrition interventions. Measurement challenges identified included adults' limited recall and awareness of food insecurity during childhood, stigma, and desire to portray parents positively. Qualitative analysis of rich, emic data on food insecurity experiences offered insights on the most relevant constructs to address in survey measures of this potential antecedent of current practices.

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1. Introduction

Foundational research on the conceptualization and measurement of food insecurity has identified multiple components of hunger, including not only quantity and quality of food but also psychosocial impacts such as feelings of deprivation and disruption of meal patterns (Radimer, Olson, Greene, Campbell, & Habicht, 1992). These insights on measurement correspond to nuanced definitions of food security that include reference to "assured ability to acquire acceptable foods in socially acceptable ways" (US Department of Agriculture, 2016). Valid multi-faceted measures of food security (Keenan, Olson, Hersey, & Parmer, 2001) based on in-depth exploration of families' experiences have made it possible to consider relationships with numerous outcomes beyond

immediate reductions in food intake and resultant hunger or undernutrition (Campbell, 1991).

Food insecurity measurable at the level of children in the family is considered most severe (Bickel, Nord, Price, Hamilton, & Cook, 2000) and is likely to be a life experience with long-term psychosocial and behavioral implications. Although parents attempt to shield them from the effects of limited food access, children are often aware of food insecurity and even take steps to manage it (Fram et al., 2011; Harvey, 2016; Richards & Smith, 2007).

Influences on parental feeding behavior may be a mechanism for transmitting the impacts of food insecurity across generations. Current food insecurity has been linked to parental concern about anxiety and hardships impacting children's health and development (Knowles, Rabinowich, Ettinger de Cuba, Cutts, & Chilton, 2016) and compensatory feeding practices that do not support healthful child eating habits (Feinberg, Kavanagh, Young, & Prudent, 2008) and are associated with child overweight (Bauer et al., 2015; Bronte-Tinkew, Zaslow, Capps, Horowitz, &

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McNamara, 2007).

In addition to the impacts of current food insecurity, a life course perspective (Devine, 2005) suggests that *early* food insecurity could have persistent effects. For example, there is some evidence that experiencing food insecurity as a child may influence parental practices when one becomes an adult. Parents report that their own childhood memories of deprivation make it hard to say no to their children's food requests (Herman, Malhotra, Wright, Fisher, & Whitaker, 2012; Olson, Bove, & Miller, 2007) and parents' childhood mealtime experiences influence later attitudes about family meals (Malhotra et al., 2013). In a study of current child feeding practices among Korean and Chinese immigrant mothers, researchers found that mothers who experienced food insecurity in childhood were less likely to be concerned about what their children ate or to perceive that their children were overweight (Cheah & Van Hook, 2012). Another study found that Latino immigrant mothers who experienced food insecurity in childhood tended to perceive larger portion sizes as appropriate and reported less monitoring of children's consumption of sweets or snacks, although this relationship was not independent of mothers' education (Kuyper, Smith, & Kaiser, 2009).

Potential influences on subsequent parental behavior have important public health implications in light of growing evidence of the salience of parents' feeding behaviors and the home food environment for child eating habits and weight status (Skouteris et al., 2011; Yee, Lwin, & Ho, 2017). Authoritative feeding styles [characterized by responsiveness and child-centered approaches to influencing behavior (Hughes, Power, Orlet Fisher, Mueller, & Nicklas, 2005)] and related feeding practices are recommended to help children maintain healthy weights, but are less commonly practiced by low-income and minority parents (Hughes et al., 2006; McPhie, Skouteris, Daniels, & Jansen, 2012). Despite willingness and motivation, low-income parents have reported multiple barriers to behavior change and adoption of responsive parenting strategies promoted in nutrition and parenting education programs (Dickin & Seim, 2013). While interventions to help low-income families adopt healthful dietary habits often consider barriers related to current family context, knowledge, skills, time constraints and cultural norms (Chipman & Kendall, 1989; McPhie et al., 2012), the role of previous experiences over the life course (Devine, 2005; Wethington, 2005) and potential psychosocial barriers to behavioral change are rarely addressed.

Research is needed to increase our understanding of the antecedents of parenting practices (Mena, Gorman, Dickin, Greene, & Tovar, 2015) and how parents' ability to adopt recommended practices may be hindered by barriers resulting from life course experiences. Despite considerable attention to quantitative measurement of *current* food insecurity, much less is known about how people remember and view childhood food insecurity experiences once they grow up and have families of their own. Qualitative research exploring "emic" or insiders' perspectives (Young & Peltó, 2012) on childhood food insecurity can bridge this knowledge gap. In-depth interviews can identify key constructs to include in quantitative assessment of these memories, and explore potential barriers to obtaining useful data such as parents' ability and willingness to remember and describe life course experiences. Previous research using this approach led to development a scale recommended for use with Latino immigrant populations (Kuyper et al., 2006). The scale had good psychometric properties in the sample studied but results of cognitive testing were not reported in detail and, to our knowledge, this scale has not been tested other populations.

Additional investigation on how childhood food insecurity is remembered and reported can support further development of measures for use in research on the influence of these early

experiences and for guiding behavior change intervention efforts. Adult education theory holds that there is a "need to address the feelings learners have about past and present experiences for learning to occur" (Peters, 1991, p.198). A valid screening tool to identify parents who experienced food insecurity in childhood would facilitate tailoring of programming to support participants who may face particular challenges in adopting new behaviors and thereby enhance the effectiveness of nutrition education programs for low-income families.

As an initial step toward retrospective assessment of early food insecurity experiences, we developed a short questionnaire and conducted in-depth interviews to assess its usefulness in capturing memories of food insecurity. The objective was to explore how a diverse group of low-income parents recalled and described childhood experiences with food insecurity, in order to understand how these experiences were perceived later in life and to inform development of measurement approaches to identify other parents who had such experiences. This paper presents qualitative findings illuminating parents' perspectives on and ways of expressing what they remembered about food access and availability in childhood.

2. Methods

2.1. Sampling

Recruitment focused on low-income parents or primary caregivers who were likely to have experienced food insecurity in childhood and would be able to reflect on life course impacts on their current child feeding practices. Participants were recruited purposefully from four counties in New York State (two in rural/small town areas, two in suburban areas) through programs offered by Cooperative Extension or its partner organizations in these communities.

Staff of these agencies explained the project to people receiving services, and then either provided the interviewer with a list of participants who were willing to be contacted or set up interviews directly. Using the first strategy, the interviewer received contact information for 32 people through their engagement in educational programs offered by Cooperative Extension; 14 were successfully contacted and agreed to an interview, and eight were actually interviewed. Using the second recruitment approach, staff of partner agencies (social services, food pantries, and a homeless shelter) scheduled 25 interviews with eligible participants. Of these, 21 were actually interviewed, but interviews with two participants who spoke limited English were excluded from analysis. No potential participants approached by the interviewer declined directly; interviews that did not occur were primarily due to inability to contact people and no-shows. In total, 27 interviews were included in the analysis.

Individual interviews lasted thirty minutes to one hour and were conducted in private locations in public settings convenient and familiar to participants. Participants were interviewed until theoretical saturation was reached, i.e. little new information was being reported on key emergent themes. All protocols and data collection instruments were reviewed and approved by the Cornell University Institutional Review Board. All participants provided written informed consent prior to interviews and recording of interviews (two declined to be recorded), and were given modest monetary compensation for their time.

2.2. Interviewing

Cognitive interviewing techniques (Willis, 1999) were employed to test comprehension, interpretation, and ease of use of a five-item draft survey tool for identifying previous food insecurity, adapted

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