



## Research report

## Role of expendable income and price in food choice by low income families

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## ABSTRACT

The public health literature suggests that the cheapness of energy-dense foods is driving the obesity epidemic. We examined food purchases in low-income families and its relationship to the price of food and availability of funds. In-depth interviews were conducted with 22 parents with children less than 15 years of age whose major source of income was a government pension. A photo taxonomy, where participants sorted 50 photos of commonly purchased foods, was used to explore food choice. The most common food groupings used by the participants were: basic, emergency, treat and comfort. The process of food purchase was described by participants as weighing up the attributes of a food in relation to price and money available. Shoppers nominated the basic unit of measurement as quantity per unit price and the heuristic for food choice when shopping as determining “value for money” in a process of triage relating to food purchase decisions. Participants stated satiation of hunger to be the most common “value” relative to price. Given that the foods nominated as filling tended to be carbohydrate-rich staples, we suggest that public health initiatives need to acknowledge this triage process and shape interventions to promote nutrition over satiation.

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## Introduction

Diet-related diseases such as obesity, diabetes and heart disease are reaching almost epidemic proportions in Western countries. The cost to the community in terms of government expenditure and human suffering is immense (Finkelstein, Trogdon, Cohen, & Dietz, 2009). Epidemiological studies describe a socio-economic gradient in healthy eating, with those with fewer socio-economic resources less likely to meet dietary recommendations, and instead consuming diets high in fat, sugar and salt and low in fibre (Ball, Crawford, & Mishra, 2006; Giskes, Turrell, van Lenthe, Brug, & Mackenbach, 2006; Janssen, Boyce, Simpson, & Pickett, 2006). In wealthy countries, it has been suggested that poor dietary habits are more pronounced among those experiencing extreme socio-economic disadvantage (Turrell, Blakely, Patterson, & Oldenburg, 2004).

Food choice, however, is complex. A significant body of research exists to describe food choice its determinants (Sobal & Bisogni, 2009). These processes are dependent on the discipline of the researcher, or the “lenses” (Antin & Hunt, 2012, p. 289) through which social scientists analyse food “behaviour”; be they individual, cultural, social or structural. Psychological research has

identified the following factors: price, taste, health, convenience (Furst, Connors, Bisogni, Sobal, & Falk, 1996; Glanz, Basil, Maibach, Goldberg, & Snyder, 1998; Lennernas et al., 1997), mood, sensory appeal, natural content, weight control, familiarity and ethical concerns (Steptoe, Pollard, & Wardle, 1995).

The price of food has been shown to have precedence over other determinants of food choice for low income families (Blanck et al., 2009; Glanz et al., 1998). Other environmental and behavioural factors that influence low income families’ food choices include: access to healthy food (Cummins & Macintyre, 2006), psychological stress (Dallman, Pecoraro, & la Fleur, 2005), difficulty balancing work demands with feeding a family (Devine, Connors, Sobal, & Bisogni, 2003; Devine et al., 2006), and poor nutrition knowledge (Hendrie, Coveney, & Cox, 2008). The importance of factors vary by demographic and lifestyle characteristics (Scheibehenne, Miesler, & Todd, 2007).

Recently, public health researchers have highlighted food price as a predominant determinant of food choice and obesity in poor families (Drewnowski, 2009). Here, classical economic theory is used to explain choice in terms of maximising the consumers’ utility or benefit (Drewnowski & Darmon, 2005). Economic theory posits that when financial resources become limited, consumers on low incomes try to maximise food choice utility by getting the most calories for their dollar, i.e. filling up (Drewnowski & Specter, 2004). This results in the consumption of energy-dense

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foods, such as biscuits, which are relatively cheap in terms of dollars per kilocalorie. Such behaviour, however, is proposed to negate the consumption of nutrient-rich but energy spare foods, such as fruits and vegetables which are relatively more expensive using the metric dollars per kilocalorie.

Previous research has also identified the satiation of hunger as a determinant of food choice (Booth, 2003; Halford, Hill, & Blundell, 2005). However, while we know that income and food price are determinants of food purchase, the process of food choice in relation to available money for low income consumers is not well understood. We do not know *how* these factors operate. It is not known *how* consumers operationalise satiation of hunger as a priority in relation to food price and available funds. Given this research paucity, we examine this process for low income consumers.

In order to capture and understand the complex and subtle nature of food choice, different methods are required. We employ qualitative methods which enabled us to examine how participants described, made sense of and understood the process of food purchase. We also use visual methods, in this case photo-elicitation, which can be advantageous for examining food choice. As defined by Harper (2002, p. 13), photo-elicitation means “inserting a photograph into a research interview”. Research incorporating photo-elicitation uses photographs either taken by the researcher, the participant or another source, as a tool to extract information related to the participant’s experiences (Power, 2003). As Bernard (1998, p. 708) explains, photo-elicitation can indicate “how people think about and locate meaning in the world around them”. Despite photo-elicitation being able to evoke the sensual, non-rational and material aspects of life (Power, 2003), there are relatively few studies on food choice in low income families that have used these methods (see: Antin & Hunt, 2012; Johnson, Sharkey, McIntosh, & Dean, 2010; Valera, Gallin, Schuk, & Davis, 2009).

## Methods

Consistent with previous studies of food choice and food insecurity, a taxonomic card sort (Pelto, 1989; Spradley, 1979) and a concurrent semi-structured interview (Ayres, 2008) were used to generate data regarding participants’ food purchase decisions and preparation practices, explanations for these choices and the ways that depleted financial resources influenced food choices.

### Recruitment

A sample of participants were recruited through a study of a federal government Welfare to Work programme (see Cook, Davis, McKenzie, & Smyth, 2009 for the recruitment procedure of the larger study) that aimed to increase workforce participation for income support recipients including sole parents, those with disabilities, and the long-term unemployed (Commonwealth of Australia, 2005). The inclusion criteria for the current study were a weekly disposable household income of less than \$A500 and at least one child less than 15 years of age living in the household.

### Participants

The number of participants ( $n = 22$ ) was determined by data saturation, where no new information was being derived from subsequent interviews (Morse & Field, 1995). The majority of participants were women (M:F, 2:20), ranging in age from 25 to 50 years. Over half (63%) had completed high school or vocational training. Only four participants had partners; which was a function of recruiting participants though the larger project that had an emphasis on single parents. Participants were either parents

( $n = 21$ ) or grandparents ( $n = 1$ ) of children. All participants received government income support as their primary income.

At the time of the study (2007–2008) pensions received provided between A\$372 and A\$471 per week, while the average Australian weekly household income was A\$811 (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2009). All participants had experienced food insecurity in the last year, defined as having run out of food and not having money to buy more food at least once in the last year (Wunderlich & Norwood, 2006). One participant was born in China, and two Australian-born participants had parents born overseas (Lebanon; Italy). All other participants were Australian-born with Australian-born parents.

### Data collection

All interviews were conducted by the first author in the participants’ homes. Participants were presented with 50 photos of the most commonly purchased foods in Australian supermarkets. The photographs included both “healthy” and “unhealthy” foods, as defined by the Australian Guide to Healthy Eating (Kellest, Smith, & Schmerlaib, 1998). Participants were asked to sort the food photos into piles that were meaningful for them, as there were no pre-ordained categories.

For each sorted pile of photos, questions were asked about the meaning attributed to each. This was an open-ended interview activity. For the food items within each pile, participants were then asked the process of food choice. Probes were used to stimulate the discussion, for example: “Where would you buy that? How much does it cost? When do you buy it? Why do you buy it? How do you store it? How do you cook it? How did you learn to cook it? Who in the family likes to eat it?” During each interview, participants were also asked the steps taken to secure food when money ran out.

With permission, interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Field notes (Brodsky, 2008) were written after each interview in order to provide contextual information to assist with interpretation. Demographic information including gender, age, years of education and income source were collected at the end of each interview. All participants received a \$20 gift voucher as compensation for their time. The study protocol was approved by the Deakin University Human Research Ethics Committee.

### Data analysis

In order to develop an in-depth understanding of the data, all transcripts were read through twice. On a third reading the first and second authors coded and categorised (Green et al., 2007) the interviews independently and then together, thus enhancing the validity of the analysis.

The analysis of the coded data involved three levels. First, at a descriptive level, the major taxonomic classifications or photo food groupings used by participants were identified. Second, codes were developed to describe and assign meaning to the different types of foods contained within each category. The results of these analyses are presented below (‘Food Groupings’).

The third level of analysis sought to develop from the above an explanatory model of participants’ decision-making processes. Here, we employed the constant-comparison method of analysis (Dye, Schatz, Rosenberg, & Coleman, 2000) to identify similarities and differences between participants’ experiences and circumstances, and identify over-arching influences and preferences. The results of this process are described in the ‘How Food is Chosen’ section, below.

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