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Research report

Food choice as a multidimensional experience. A qualitative study with young African American women ☆

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ABSTRACT

As obesity persists in the United States, many public health interventions have been conceived to encourage people to change their diets. These interventions are based on encouraging people to prioritize healthier alternatives in food choice. However a consideration of the existing but limited literature on food choice for diverse populations renders such an assumption problematic. This qualitative study examined the food choices of a population most at risk for obesity – low-income African American women – by considering psychological factors, social and cultural meanings of foods, and structural conditions that shape how women decide what to eat. Interviews revealed the complexity of their food choices, illustrating the extent to which multiple influences operate simultaneously on food choice decisions. Implications for obesity prevention are discussed, in particular highlighting the problem that some types of public health interventions do not correspond to the lived experiences of the populations they intend to target.

Introduction

Obesity has emerged in the public consciousness as an important public health concern (Campos, Saguy, Ernsberger, Oliver, & Gaesser 2006; Rich & Evans, 2005). Over 60% of American adults ages 20 and older are defined as overweight or obese (Flegal, Carroll, Ogden, & Curtin 2010), and among the most at risk are African American women. Approximately, 3 out of 4 African American women are considered overweight or obese (Flegal et al., 2010).

Because obesity prevalence continues to rise, many food-related public health interventions have been conceived to encourage people to change their diets. Taxes on junk foods, increasing the availability of fresh foods in food insecure communities, nutritional labeling in grocery stores, and restaurant menu labeling requirements are a few examples (Nestle & Jacobson, 2000; Seymour, Lazarus Yaroch, Serdula, Blanck, & Khan, 2004; White, 2007). People are confronted with these public health interventions in diverse locations where a variety of factors, not just health, may shape food choice. The individual importance of these factors may vary by context. As Steptoe, Pollard, and Wardle (1995) have argued, "health is clearly not the only factor people take into account when choosing their food, and a focus on health may lead to exclusive emphasis on a set of motives that are of limited significance for many people" (p. 268). This conclusion is critically important within the context of interventions designed to change people's food choices in as much as it calls into question the extent to which people will prioritize health over other factors of food choice.

The multi-dimensionality of food choice is largely neglected in the health literature, yet it plays an important role in whether and to what extent public health interventions can and will shape food choice for diverse populations. This paper reports on findings from an investigation of food choice for low-income, African American women between the ages of 18–25. Based on data gathered in 20 in-depth, multi-method qualitative interviews, this study provides descriptive narrative data to illuminate important factors of, meanings about, and constraints on food choice for African American women.

Theory

The public health literature on obesity and dietary change draws very little from the food choice literature and, therefore, results in a body of work that largely assumes that given favorable conditions, people prioritize health when making food choice decisions. As a result, public health interventions tend to focus

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primarily on increasing people's nutritional knowledge and/or investigating how to make *healthy* choices easy by, for example, increasing availability or decreasing the costs of foods that are considered *healthy*. Unfortunately these approaches ignore the multidimensional experience of food choice and, at times, fall short because they do not correspond to the lived experiences of targeted populations (Douglas, 1984). This study is designed to bridge the public health research with the extensive literature on food choice.

A significant body of social scientific research on food exists, discussing related phenomena in different terms—e.g. food choice, foodways, food or eating behaviors, and food habits—depending upon the disciplinary background of the researcher. The lenses through which social scientists analyze food behaviors may differ because of the ways in which they're oriented to examine issues from either an individual, cultural, social, or structural perspective. However, in spite of their varying perspectives, the tremendous amount of multidisciplinary research on food has resulted in an extensive body of work from which to inform public health efforts.

Psychological research on food choice has contributed much to our understanding about the factors that people use to make decisions about what to eat. A *factor* refers to the type of information used when making a food selection (Scheibehenne, Miesler, & Todd, 2007), and those most commonly discussed in the literature include health, mood, convenience, sensory appeal, natural content, price, weight control, familiarity, and ethical concerns (Steptoe et al., 1995). The importance of factors is said to vary by demographic and lifestyle characteristics, though taste and sensory appeal are considered among the most important across groups (Scheibehenne et al., 2007).

To begin to understand *why* certain factors of food choice are salient for people, we can look to complementary studies that examine the cultural, social, and structural environments that influence why people eat what they eat. Socially and culturally constructed beliefs and values, which are learned and negotiated throughout our lives, exert a powerful influence on how people make food choice decisions (Corrigan, 1997; Douglas, 1972; Douglas & Isherwood, 1979; Lupton, 1994; Mintz & DuBois, 2002; Murcott, 1988; Wood, 1995). Foods, themselves, are imbued with meanings that are defined by the cultural and social environments in which we live, and those meanings are communicated to others through consumption (Douglas, 1972). By considering these influences on the food choice process, we may be able to see why, in a given context, people report certain factors of food choice over others. For example, Devine, Sobal, Bisogni, and Connors (1999) found that African American respondents frequently expressed their ethnic identity through food choice, particularly at family gatherings and holidays. By choosing culturally appropriate foods, a person projects an identity because the consumption of those foods communicates meanings about identity to others. Understanding a person's desire to convey a particular identity through food choice might explain *why* she reports one factor of food choice over another as important.

The structural environment in which one lives may also help to explain the salience of specific food choice factors. For example, a lack of access to food stores in neighborhoods may inhibit residents from being able to consume foods that are considered healthy (Cummins, Findlay, Petticrew, & Sparks 2005; Inagami, Cohen, Brown, & Asch, 2009; Troy, Miller, & Olson, 2011; Wrigley, Warm, & Margetts, 2002; Zenk et al., 2005), resulting in factors other than health to drive food choice decisions. Similarly, high concentrations of fast food outlets in neighborhoods, which often appear in areas with higher concentrations of African American residents, may increase consumption of nutritionally poor foods, resulting in obesity (Kwate, 2008; Kwate, Yau, Loh, & Williams, 2009). As such, characteristics of the structural environments may constrain or enable the food choice process, shedding light on the factors of food choice people report as important.

Taken together, this multidimensional understanding of food choice guided all aspects of the study design. This includes the data collection instruments and analytical procedures, both of which will be discussed in more detail. By using such an approach, we were able to not only identify factors of food choice that may be salient for our sample but also to contextualize those factors to explain why they are salient. Analyses focused on identifying social and cultural meanings and structural constraints and enablers that helped to (1) elucidate additional factors of food choice not identified in the literature that were salient for women and (2) explain reasons for *why* certain factors of food choice emerged as important for women's food choices.

Methods

Multi-method design

We used a multi-method qualitative design for this study because of qualitative methods' utility for examining how people make sense of and interpret their behaviors, beliefs, and social worlds (Bernard, 1998; Maxwell, 2005). Between May and September 2010, 20 African American women were recruited from low-income areas in the San Francisco East Bay area. We posted signs in laundromats, convenience stores, and at a local community service organization as well as online on Craigslist. Potential volunteers were screened by phone to determine eligibility to ensure that women were between the ages of 18 and 25, African American, and lived in the San Francisco East Bay area in a census track with a high concentration of households with incomes under the poverty level. All interviews were conducted by the lead researcher in a confidential room at either the lead researcher's offices or a local community service organization.

Interviews lasted approximately two hours and were comprised of a brief close-ended section to collect basic demographic information on each respondent and an extensive open-ended section including three different qualitative methods: open-ended questions, a freelist and card sorting activity, and a photo-elicitation activity. We incorporated multiple qualitative methods in an attempt to reduce the systematic bias that may result from one qualitative method alone while also relying on complementary innovative qualitative methods to help uncover what might be unconscious decision making around food. The three methods investigated similar research topics, and as a result, findings from the analysis of the discussion of each of the three activities can be compared and contrasted. A theme emerging across all three methods enhances the credibility of findings, or contrastingly, this strategy also permits us to access different information related to the research questions. Because food choice processes are often implicit and unconscious, incorporating methods to help reveal the complexities of food choice is valuable.

The open-ended interview questions were informed by the extensive literature on food choice, but they were also adapted throughout data collection. As evolving themes and patterns emerged from interviews, open-ended questions were refined, omitted, and added. Topics of interest included food memories and history, changes in food habits over time, definitions of and influences on food choice, and body image.

The freelist and card sorting activity sought to examine respondents' food typologies. These activities are techniques developed by cognitive anthropologists to help investigate "how people think about and locate meaning in the world around them (Bernard, 1998, pg 708). Respondents were asked to list an exhaustive array of foods that they had consumed over the past seven days. During