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Research Report

Dimensions of everyday eating and drinking episodes

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Abstract

This study sought to gain conceptual understanding of the situational nature of eating and drinking by analyzing 7 consecutive, qualitative 24-h recalls of foods and beverages consumed from 42 US adults who worked in non-managerial, non-professional positions. Participants were purposively recruited to vary in age, gender, occupation, and household composition. For each recall, participants described foods and beverages consumed, location, people present, thoughts and feelings, and activities occurring at that time. Analysis of verbatim transcripts of interviews identified 1448 eating and drinking episodes. Constant comparative analysis of participants' descriptions for episodes resulted in a conceptual framework that characterizes eating and drinking episodes as holistic and as having eight interconnected dimensions (food and drink, time, location, activities, social setting, mental processes, physical condition, recurrence). Each dimension has multiple features that can be used to describe the episodes. In recalling episodes, participants used conventional labels (e.g. "dinner") as well as modified-conventional labels (e.g. "birthday dinner") and uniquely constructed labels (e.g. "unwind time"). Labels provided insights into the dimensions of the episodes. Results suggest approaches for researchers and practitioners who seek to understand how people manage everyday eating at a time when traditional meal patterns are changing.

Keywords: Qualitative; Adult; Eating; Situations; Food; Drinking; Food choice; Meals; Snacks; Environment

Introduction

How and why people eat as they do are critical questions for food choice researchers, healthcare practitioners, and the food industry. In many Western societies, traditional meal patterns and practices have yielded to new ways of eating in response to changing work roles, family organization, household structures, lifestyles, and food systems (Cullen, 1994; Edwards, 2000; Lin, Frazao, & Guthrie, 1999; Poulain, 2002; Riley, 1994). Compared to past eras, more food is prepared and/or eaten away from home, and the frequency of family meals has declined (Cullen, 1994; Edwards, 2000; Mestdag, 2005; Poulain, 2002). With multiple food options available and the decline of strong traditional norms for eating (Fischler, 1988), individuals can more easily construct their own ways of eating. Researchers need new ways to conceptualize eating situations in societies where food consumption is possible and acceptable at many different times and places.

Most previous research about eating by free-living individuals has focused on the foods and nutrients consumed or the characteristics of the person, with much less attention to situational factors (de Graaf, 2000; Haines, Hungerford, Popkin, & Gulkey, 1992; Kant, 1996; Lennernas & Andersson, 1999; Lin et al., 1999). Adults participating in dietary change programs have reported that situational factors often make it difficult to implement recommended dietary practices (Falk, Bisogni, & Sobal, 2000; Janas, Bisogni, & Campbell, 1993). While the importance of situational factors in eating has been acknowledged by food choice researchers, situational variation in eating, both within person and between persons, remains poorly understood.

Research about situational eating relates to early studies of situational consumer behavior by Belk that focused on "all those factors particular to a time and place of observation which do not follow from a knowledge of

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personal and stimulus attributes and which have a demonstrable and systematic effect on current behavior'' (Belk, 1975b). He grouped features of situations into five dimensions or categories of characteristics: physical surroundings, social surroundings, temporal perspectives, task definition, and antecedent states.

The issues that food choice researchers have faced in studying situational eating mirror the challenges encountered by other researchers who have debated terms, units of analysis, and data collection methods (e.g. Barker, 1975; Belk, 1975a, b; Wicker, 1975). Food choice researchers often interchangeably use the terms situation, context, and setting, with these terms usually referring to elements involved in the act of eating that are external to the person and beyond the specific food of interest. Situational factors in food choice research include reference to temporal, physical, social, cultural, economic, and other aspects of settings (Marshall, 1993; Meiselman, 1996; Shepherd & Sparks, 1994). The terms and principles food choice researchers have used to describe the ways that eating situations vary depend upon the orientation of the research (sensory, cultural, social, nutritional, psychological, physiological, economic), the level of analysis (e.g. swallows, bites, portion sizes, initiation/termination of eating, foods consumed, manners), and the research approach (experimental, ethnographic/phenomenological) (Bell & Meiselman, 1995; Camp, 1989; Fischler, 1980; Meiselman, Johnson, Reeve, & Crouch, 2000; Meiselman & MacFie, 1996; Pliner & Rozin, 2000; Rozin & Tuorila, 1993).

Studies focused on situational variation in eating have paid little attention to understanding situational variation in eating from the perspectives of people themselves (Bell & Pliner, 2003; de Castro, 1988). This approach is consistent with psychological models of person–environment relationships that emphasize the importance of a person's perception of the situation (Lewin, Heider, & Heider, 1936).

A dilemma for researchers studying eating situations is the absence of agreement about what terms best describe acts of eating and systems for categorizing them (Lennernas & Andersson, 1999; Marshall, 1993; Oltersdorf, Schlettwein-Gsell, & Winkler, 1999). Western researchers have often used the term ''meals'' to mean regular or planned eating events that involve multiple foods plus a drink, that have a structure or sequence of dishes, and that usually involve a social dimension (Douglas & Nicod, 1974; Meiselman, 2000; Murcott, 1982). In contrast, ''snacks'' have usually been characterized as unplanned, as involving one food, and as individual (Marshall, 2000; Marshall & Bell, 2003). Only a few researchers have reported the terms people themselves used to describe their eating (Andersson, Nydahl, Gustafsson, Sidenvall, & Fjellstrom, 2003; Chamontin, Pretzer, & Booth, 2003).

The terms ''meals'' and ''snacks,'' however, may be less suitable labels when eating practices and patterns are changing. Alternative terms in the literature include ''eating occasions'' (e.g. de Graaf et al., 2005; Kant & Graubard, 2003; Marshall, 1995; Oltersdorf et al., 1999), ''eating events'' (e.g. Andersson et al., 2003; Lennernas & Andersson, 1999; Wahlqvist, Kouris-Blazos, & Wattanapenpaiboon, 1999), ''eating moments'' (e.g. de Graaf et al., 2005), and ''eating episodes'' (e.g. Redlin, Miltenberger, Crosby, Wolff, & Stickney, 2002; Rogers & Smit, 2000).

This study sought to develop a conceptual framework that could be used to examine differences in eating and drinking situations that was grounded in people's own perspectives on these situations. This analysis uses ''episodes'' to refer to the specific acts of eating and drinking that people reported because an episode is considered ''any event or series of events complete in itself but forming part of a larger one'' (Newfeldt & Guralnik, 1997). The study aimed to understand the ''lived-day'' experiences of individuals, which have been described as a series of ''act-episodes'' (Craik, 2000). The use of the term episodes was reinforced by participants' reports that eating and drinking were part of the progression of their days and linked to their daily schedules and their roles and responsibilities at home and at work. Other terms used to describe acts of eating did not convey that meaning.

Methods

The data analyzed for this study were collected as part of a larger project examining how adults working in non-managerial and non-professional positions constructed food choice at home and away from home. Study participants provided several types of data about their food choices that were collected over 9 different contacts with the same interviewer. This analysis examined the data collected through 7 consecutive, qualitative 24-h recalls of eating and drinking episodes, an approach similar to the diary method that others have used to understand the details of eating among free-living individuals (e.g. Bellisle, Dalix, & de Castro, 1999; Bellisle et al., 2003).

Participants

This study focused on adults working in non-professional, non-managerial positions because in the US these workers tend to have lower incomes than other working adults, placing them at higher risk for health problems compared to other workers (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2000; US Department of Health and Human Services, 2000). Study participants resided in a mixed population density region of upstate New York and were recruited through community agencies, employers, advertisements in local newspapers, and personal contacts. Participants were purposively sampled to vary in gender, age, occupation, and living situation. All study participants met the following criteria: employed at least part-time in a non-managerial, non-professional position; between the ages of 20 and 62; not a full-time student; and not pregnant or lactating. Participants provided information about their personal, household, and employment characteristics on