

Food Choices among University Students

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to examine the food choices made among University students. The focus of this study was not the foods they choose to eat but rather the reasons that drive their choices regarding food. It is believed that food choices are strongly based on identity including past circumstances and current lifestyle. For this study four California State University, Chico students were selected based on their majors to assess whether their focus of study makes a difference on how food is viewed. The participants included three females and one male with their ages ranging from early twenties to early thirties. All of the participants were interviewed for approximately thirty minutes each. After reviewing the information derived from the interviews it was found that there were many similarities as well as differences in regards to the participants' food choices. The participants' choices were mainly influenced by: their majors, availability and accessibility, health/nutrition, culture, and past experiences. The effects of family on present choices had an overall positive effect. Many negative barriers were also found such as lack of time. From the interviews it can be concluded that lifestyle and parental influence make a significant impact on their children's food choices.

INTRODUCTION

For many people, choosing what to eat may seem to be very simple. However, a lifetime of events and current situations dictate not only the choices that we have but also the choices we

decide to make. For instance, a bad experience with broccoli in the past may cause a person to never like broccoli and thus never choose to eat it. On the positive end of the spectrum if a person has a wonderful experience as a child with parents who loved to cook amazing meals that person may grow up to be passionate about cooking as well. As in most situations, a person's past determines their mindset today.

Present situation are also believed to play a large role in food choice. For example, a person who doesn't own a car won't travel very far from their home to purchase food. They will most likely shop at the closest place to them. Proximity, in this case, dictates the choices this person has when choosing food.

This study will attempt to analyze the many different situations surrounding food choice. Many studies simply address what types of food that people eat. However, it is essential to also focus on why these choices are made. Groups of people are often treated as a single unit rather than an individual and it is important to understand choices made by individuals rather than groups as a whole. Generalizations can be made from groups of individuals with similar characteristics. These characteristics are key in the overall comprehension of what influences a person's food behavior. For this study the factors that influence food choices have been narrowed down to several different sub categories including: major, health/nutrition, culture, past experiences, and availability/ accessibility.

This study will examine these factors in hopes of discovering something new about how people evaluate and justify their own reasoning. Circumstances out of one's control, such as lack of time, will also be considered. It is important to gain insight on how people make the choices that they do because ultimately it is the reasons behind choices that must be understood before any change should be made. It is imperative because when health professionals are attempting to

implement an eating program for a patient choosing food for them, stating the facts, and hoping they change is not enough. Understanding an individual's choices must come first otherwise counseling can be ineffective.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The article "Who We Are and How We Eat: A Qualitative Study of Identities in Food Choice" is a qualitative study that wished to develop a theoretical view on eating through interviewing a group of adults to "examine identity and eating" that are "involved in participants' food choices" (Bisogni, et al., 2002).

According to the article, the "concept of identity may help researchers understand food choice processes and assist practitioners in recognizing the multiple meanings that people bring to and derive from eating" (Bisogni, et al., 2002). To fully make a difference in people's lives we need to understand them and not just try to make them understand proper nutrition and its benefits. Food choice is heavily influenced by how people identify themselves. Individuals identify themselves based on their current circumstances as well as past experiences. These concepts aided in developing the research questions for this study by helping to minimize broad ideas related to food choice to a narrowed concept.

The research methods for this article included interviewing a small sample of adults and reviewing each person's "characteristics and self-reported ways of eating" (Bisogni, et al., 2002). Interview questions from this article were used to develop the open-ended questions for this study. Some of these questions include "How would you describe the type of eater you are?" and "Have you always been this kind of eater?" (Bisogni, et al., 2002).

Another qualitative article, “A Biographical Study of Food Choice Capacity: Standards, Circumstances, and Food Management Skills,” focused its research on understanding how individuals manage food choice and how it relates to “life course events and experiences” (Bisogni, et al., 2005). As stated previously, past experiences is one of the influential factors being analyzed in this paper. This article states that an individual’s life is dictated by many different forces “resulting in life course trajectories, turning points, or transitions that can enhance or impede the adoption of recommended practices” (Bisogni, et al., 2005). These ideas also helped in developing the research questions for this paper. The focus of this paper is how people chose foods based on past and current life circumstances and the concepts from this article tie well with developing the concepts for this study.

METHODS

The participants for this study included four individuals who are students at California State University, Chico. Three of the participants were female and one was male; their ages range from early twenties to early thirties. The study participants were recruited from the CSU Chico campus and were selected based on their majors. They all participated voluntarily in brief, qualitative interviews. Each interview lasted approximately thirty minutes and consisted of twelve open ended questions. The interview questions (Table 1) were designed to bring out detailed answers from the individuals and ideally gain a sufficient glimpse into what ultimately drives them to make their choices. For confidentiality purposes the participants have been renamed: participant A, participant B, participant C, and participant D.

Interview Questions
1. Tell me about what drives you to make choices about the food that you consume? Probe: Do these reasons vary? Tell me more.
2. Tell me how you manage food and eating for yourself?
3. How would you describe the type of eater you are?
4. Have you always been this kind of eater? How have you changed?
5. Are you a person who likes familiar foods? Different foods?
6. What kind of eater would you like to be?
7. How are the foods you chose to eat influenced by past experiences?
8. How are the foods you chose to eat influenced by nutrition? Probe: Where do you get your information on food and nutrition?
9. Are there aspects of your habits that you wish to change?
10. How does media influence your choices? Probe: How has the latest media craze influenced your choices? Specifics?
11. How does your social circle influence food choices? Has this changed over the years and how has this caused you to adapt?
12. What is your food personality?

■ **Table 1**

Participant A is a female CSU Chico student in her early twenties who is majoring in Environmental Studies with the option in Ecology and a minor in Biology. Her interview took place on March 15, 2012 in a building at the University's campus. She was detailed in her answers and excited to talk about her views on food and the choices that she makes. Her food habits revolve around her major which encourages her to make sustainable choices. She lives with roommates and does not have any children. This participant was chosen because her major does not focus directly on food and to assess how it makes a difference in her choices.

Participant B is also a female CSU Chico student in her early twenties and is majoring in Nutrition and Food Science as well as Health Education. This interview occurred on March 10, 2012 at a residence in Chico, California. This participant gave detailed and descriptive answers to all of the interview questions. She already has a degree in Culinary Arts and is passionate about food. She lives with her husband and does not have any children. This participant was

selected in order to assess how having knowledge and interest in the field of nutrition plays a role in food choice.

Participant C is a female CSU Chico student in her early thirties who is majoring in Nutrition and Food Science with the option in Dietetics. This interview took place on March 13, 2012 over the phone. Conducting the interview over the phone may have diminished the connection and focus expected during an interview but she answered the questions as well as she could. She lives with her husband, two biological children, and three step-children. This participant was selected in order to document the differences and similarities that are present between a younger and older student. This participant is no longer an adolescent like the other participants and has most likely established her values and habits on her perspective on food.

Participant D is a male CSU Chico student in his early twenties who is majoring in Psychology. This interview took place on March 14, 2012 in a building at the University's campus. He lives with male roommates and does not have any children. This participant was chosen because his major does not have an emphasis on food and to assess how that makes a difference in how he perceives his thoughts on food.

After each interview was completed, a full description of the interviews and the participants' answers were promptly typed into detailed field notes and coded using a technique called edge coding. This type of coding involves writing key points of the interview on the right side of the paper. It can be used to identify reoccurring statements and feelings provided by the participant. Edge coding is also used to organize the participant's answers and analyze the data needed to create a code matrix. A code matrix is an organizational chart used to document themes and subthemes found from the combined data. The code matrix is a useful tool used to uncover patterns and narrow down the data from a broad spectrum of answers to more relevant

findings.

RESULTS

Through extensive analysis of the information gained from all four interviews it was found that several influential factors contribute to the food choices made by the participants. The following themes were emphasized by each participant throughout their interviews and found to play the largest role in their capacity to choose what and how to eat.

College: Chosen Major

The participants in this study were selected based on their majors (Table 2) to assess whether their area of study makes a difference on how food is viewed.

Participants and their Chosen Major	
Participant	Major
A	Environmental Studies with the Option in Ecology and a Minor in Biology
B	Nutrition and Food Science and Health Education
C	Nutrition and Food Science with the Option in Dietetics
D	Psychology

■ **Table 2**

It was found that there is a positive correlation between the area of study chosen by the participants and how they view and choose food. For instance when participant A was asked the question “Tell me about what drives you to make choices about the food that you consume?” she responded that she tries to make sustainable choices. Some areas of study in her major include sustainability so it is obvious that it has made an impact on her choices. Furthermore, this participant also claims that her major makes her aware of “the practices and process of making food” and does not rely on her taste buds but “more or less the policies and economics that go

behind” food processing. This participant is strongly influenced by what she studies for her major and it is clear that it directs her food choices.

The two participants whose major is in nutrition were found to be very interested in food and seemed to be intuitive about their choices. Participant C, for example, stated that she learned how to cook a zucchini dish in one of her nutrition classes that her son, who usually hates vegetables, was actually interested in trying. She claims that getting her kids to try new foods with her keeps up her motivation to cook new, healthy foods.

Being exposed to classes that focus solely on food and nutrition has proved to be a major influence on the participant’s choices. However, even the other two participants whose major is not in nutrition were influenced by nutrition as well.

Health and Nutrition

Health and nutrition proved to be another influencer of people’s choices. In fact, many people discuss their feelings toward health when talking about their food choices and categorizing oneself as a healthy eater creates a “salient identity” and increases self esteem (Bisogni, et al. 2002). Participant A, for example is influenced by nutrition during every meal that she consumes. She claims that nutrition is one of the factors that assist her in planning her meals. The nutrition program called My Plate is one of the main ways she prepares her meals. She states that having that balance “makes [her] feel better.” When she doesn’t follow the My Plate regime she claims that she feels too sick and full and that her body “doesn’t like” unhealthy foods.

When participant D was asked how the foods he chooses are influenced by nutrition he claims that it only influences his choices when he is going through a “workout phase” in which he will consume more protein and green foods. Participant B also associated positively with

nutrition. When describing the type of eater she is, she stated that she is a healthy eater who chooses a lot of vegetarian food.

Culture

Cultural awareness of the foods that are being made and consumed was very important to three of the study participants. Interestingly, all three participants responded to different questions when they expressed how they are culturally influenced. For instance, when participant B was asked the question “What kind of eater would you like to be?” She responded that she would like to “be more aware of cultural foods in the sense of what people would make at home in that culture” and base it “on reality rather than restaurants.” For instance she enjoys making Asian foods and prefers home-style over restaurant “with her own modifications.” Culture was mentioned again when she was asked what aspects of her habits that she wishes to change. She responded that she wishes she could cook more diverse meals at home with an emphasis on cooking more Indian, Middle Eastern, and Asian dishes. Participant B added that making more Indian foods at home would make her husband happy so she wishes to cook more from that culture for him.

Participant D stated that he comes from a “Mexican household” and considers himself to be very “culturally influenced” when he cooks. He stated that he eats tortillas and beans often and likes to cook spicy foods. This participant’s preference for his cultures food is correlated strongly with his family and upbringing which suggests that his past experiences also play a major role in how he views food.

Past Experiences

When asked how past experiences influence their food consumption all four participants stated that family played a vital role. As previously stated, participant D is influenced strongly by

the Mexican culture because he was raised in a Mexican household. He states that he often tried to cook what his parents had cooked. Participant C also stated that when she makes dinner for her husband or kids she often tries to make the types of meals that her mother made when she was a child. This shows that she has had positive experiences as a child in regards to her mother's cooking. People with children tend to express "the desire to provide their own children with the same positive food and eating memories as they had" It is believed that food management skills are a result "from various life course events and experiences" (Bisogni, et al., 2005).

Although parents play a large role in what their children cook as adults they also play a role in how food is viewed. Participant A for example continues her habits as a child into her present day life. When asked what type of eater she is participant A described herself as someone who "likes fruits and vegetables more than the average person" and that half of her meal usually consists of just vegetables. She stated that she has always been this type of eater due to her mother being a "super health nut" and raising her to be that way. This proves that through "life course experiences" one can develop "strong beliefs and feelings about the way they should be eating" (Bisogni, et al., 2005).

Parental influence does not always cause their children to behave in the ways they do and can actually have a negative impact. This is apparent for participant B who says she used to be very picky because "[her] parents can't cook worth a damn." According to her they ate a lot of frozen foods "rich in sodium, sugar, and refined grains" and were "typical Americans." Her lifestyle as a child caused her to become picky and dislike many foods such as apples because her mother chose bad apples. She stated that she loves apples now only because she has learned to choose them properly. It has been recognized that a person's food mentality are

“modifications of childhood memories” and involve receiving new information to change past behaviors. It is believed that food management skills are a result “from various life course events and experiences” (Bisogni, et al., 2005). Even though her family initially had a negative impact on how she viewed food it was her family’s habits that drove her change in habits and to pursue education in culinary arts and nutrition.

Accessibility/Availability

The ability to manage food is based on many different factors, one of which involves availability and accessibility to the foods they desire. Convenience is known to be a factor that affects food behavior (Bisogni, et al., 2002). All of the participants stressed that having access to food greatly influenced their capacity to choose what to eat.

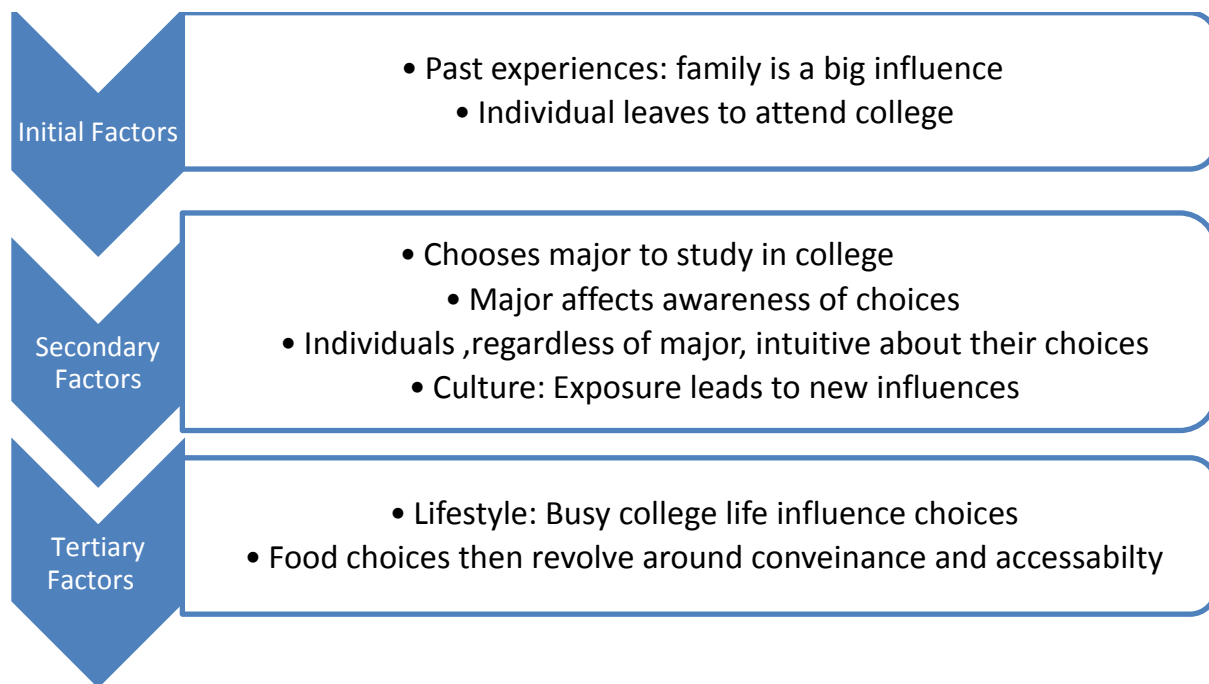
Participant A, for example, states that school puts a constraint on her choices for a couple of reasons. For one she feels that the school is lacking in options and her choices are limited on campus. Furthermore, she feels that school affects how she chooses food because she will go “six hours” without eating and becomes very hungry to the point where she wants to “eat everything” when she finally gets a chance. Even though food management includes situations out of our control, these skills still shape our capacity to choose food (Bisogni, et al., 2005). This participant’s lack of accessibility to the foods that she prefers has a negative impact on her food choices because she feels as if she does not have a choice in these situations.

Availability also impacts how participant B chooses and manages food. She does not own a car which makes accessibility an important factor. She says that that “most of the things I eat are from the Chico Natural foods store because it is convenient and only a block away” from where she lives. Convenience and proxemics dictates how much and what type of foods she is able to buy.

Participant C and D also choose their food around convenience due to their busy school schedule. Participant D stated that the only thing that gets in the way of eating is his college classes because he has to eat between them. It is believed that food management skills are a result “from various life course events and experiences” (Bisogni, et al., 2005). The skills presented here stem from the participants choice to attend college (a life course event).

DISCUSSION

The results of this study can be organized based on several factors of influence. These influences can be represented by a flow chart (Figure 1) and are categorized by primary, secondary, and tertiary factors. This figure is basically a summary of events that precede each other and affect how the individuals in this study make their choices about food.



■ Figure 1

Study Limitations

The results of this study are clearly limited due to the small sample size used to collect data. Although some evidence was found to support the proposed correlations it is possible that a larger sample size would alter the findings and provide a more in depth look at what drives a person to make certain choices regarding food.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

It can be concluded that a person's main driving factor for choosing food stems from past experiences and current lifestyle. For the participants in this study their main influences include past experiences, school, nutrition, culture, and availability. These factors, along with others, shape a person's identity, how they view themselves as eaters, and ultimately how they choose what to eat. Understanding these concepts is a valuable tool that can be used when counseling patients or just educating the general public. Considering these factors educators and counselors should be more adaptive to an individual's circumstances and be able to "emphasize personalization...and lifelong learning" (Bisogni, et al., 2005). Even though this study was solely based on the participation of university students the results from their interviews can be used in understanding other groups of people as well.

If this study were to be repeated it is recommended that a larger sample size be used to gather data. As stated previously this study was limited by the small size of participants interviewed. Interviewing a more diverse group of people would allow the expansion of this topic as well as provide more in depth findings regarding food choice. Finding a correlation between a student's major and how they view food would have been more effective if there was more of a range in majors rather than a small group. Also, more concise interview questions are

recommended. The interview questions brought out a broad spectrum of answers which made it difficult to organize and interpret.

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