



Investigating Food Choice Processes of Older Adults

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Why is investigating the food choice process of older adults important?

It is important to understand more about the food choice processes of older adults in order to develop nutrition programs and services that can optimize their nutritional intake. Many factors were hypothesized to have an effect on the food choice process of the elderly. These include life course events and experiences, beliefs, expected characteristics of foods and meals, social context, sensory perceptions, monetary considerations, convenience, and physical well-being.

What was done?

Sixteen Caucasian volunteer participants were gathered from three towns in upstate New York. They were recruited at a congregate eating centers. The population density of each town determined the number of participants that were recruited at each site. Purposeful sampling was used to ensure that the participants were of both genders and of varying ages, educational levels, income levels and living situations.

A constructivist and qualitative approach was used for data collection and analysis. Two open-ended, semi-structured interviews were used for each of the 16 participants. The first interview followed a structured guide, which explored topics like preferences, food shopping, life course, ideals, resources, social framework, food context, personal factors and values. The second interview was conducted at least 1 month after the first interview to decrease carry-over effects. The second interview was developed after analysis of the first interview and was personalized to each participant, covering topics and themes that repeatedly emerged from the first interview. The interviews were then analyzed and coded by grouping different concepts together and making a tally for recurring themes.

What was found?

The most important factor that influenced the food choice process of the elderly was ideals that formed from life course experiences, especially those that occurred in childhood. Food preparation was another factor that influenced what they ate. Widowed men and women had opposing viewpoints on food preparation; widowed men viewed cooking as a new and enjoyable challenge while widowed women were tired of cooking and were unlikely to cook if they were by themselves.

The ideals of food were important to the elderly. Ideals formed during childhood, such as eating everything that was served and defining a complete meal as having certain foods, as well as cultural differences had a strong impact on food choice. Health ideals were a powerful influence as well. Most ate certain foods to maintain their weight while others ate to avoid major illnesses like a stroke. Social framework influenced the participants' food choices because. Participants liked the socialization and companionship that meals brought and often ate what was served to them just to be with others. Personal factors like physical conditions related to aging such as digestibility problems, physical debilitations (arthritis) and dentition issues strongly affected what kinds of foods the older adults choose. Physical problems such as arthritis make it difficult for them to cook

or go out to eat with friends, while dentition issues eliminate the choice of choosing hard-to-chew foods. The participants usually chose foods that were going to maintain their physical comfort. Available income was another major factor for determining the food choices of older adults. Participants usually only chose items based on their perceived worth.

Frequently used strategies when making food choices included elimination, avoidance, limitation, substitution and routinization. Elimination and avoidance strategies were commonly used to ensure physical well-being. Limitation was used to satisfy sensory perceptions like taste while attempting to maintain health and physical comfort. Substitution was also commonly used to satisfy sensory perceptions. Routinization was used to simplify food choices. It was noted that participants that had multiple health problems tended to use more strategies when making food choices while those that had minor health problems usually concentrated on using a few.

Importance of this Research:

Since this study suggests that many of the food ideals and practices formed during childhood significantly influenced the food choices of older adults, it is important to educate children on healthy eating and nutrition. It was also noted that some foods (eg. potatoes) are liked by many older adults due to their: satisfying sensory perceptions, ease of preparation, perceived healthiness, ease of chewing and digesting. In addition, this study found that people with more health problems tended to use multiple strategies when making food choices. It would therefore be useful to educate those that are newly diagnosed with health problems to expand their current strategies.

Applying what was found

By understanding factors that impact the food choices of older adults, nutrition programs can be specifically developed for the elderly, focusing on their needs and values. By knowing which strategies are most commonly used by older adults, a nutrition educator can incorporate these approaches into a diet modification plan which can better facilitate the changes suggested.

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