Communicating about Food Choice: Tools for Professional Development

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Communicating About Food Choice: Tools for Professional Development
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Introduction

The Cornell Food Choice Research Program seeks to gain understanding of the factors and processes involved in food choice. For nearly 10 years we have focused on understanding how people experience and perceive food and eating in their daily lives. These studies have generated new conceptual models and understandings of how people in developed societies respond to personal, social, and environmental factors as well as life course experiences when they select, prepare, and eat food. The research publications that report the findings are listed in the reference section.

The purpose of Understanding Food Choice: Tools for Developing Nutrition Practitioners is to share findings from the Cornell Food Choice Research Program so that they can be used to enhance nutrition education and dietetics practice. The ideas and tools presented in this report were initially developed to extend this research to Cornell students and Cornell Cooperative educators and para-professionals. We are now ready to share them with others.

The report begins with a summary of the main findings from these research studies. Then, the teaching tools we have developed to date are presented. The publication is intended for faculty teaching undergraduate nutrition students or persons training nutrition paraprofessionals. These students may have little familiarity with social science methods or theory. Thus, the publication keeps research jargon to a minimum and emphasizes application of the research ideas to practice. Some concepts and models are described in text as well as in schematics. This redundancy gives the educator different ideas for presenting the material to students. We welcome your questions and comments about these ideas and tools as you consider applying them to your own teaching.

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Acknowledgements

The insights for practice that are reported in this publication have emerged from an engaging and productive research collaboration among current and former Cornell Food Choice Research team members. Their names are listed along with their publications in the references. Special mention is given to the long-standing researchers in this group including Jeffery Sobal, Ph.D., M.P.H., Carol M. Devine, Ph.D., R.D., Margaret (Connors) Jastran, R.D., Christine Blake, M.S., R.D., and Laura Winter Falk, Ph.D., R.D. The ideas and tools in this report would not have been made possible without the willing involvement of our study participants and the support for our studies, which has come predominantly from the USDA-CSREES.

The teaching ideas and tools that are presented have resulted from collaborations with other faculty members and Extension educators in Division of Nutritional Sciences. Special thanks is extended to Susan Travis, M.S., R.D., Patricia Thonney, M.S., and Shauna Thomas, R.D., who have pushed me to develop ways to apply the research findings to practice and worked with me in trying the tools out in different settings.
The Cornell Food Choice Research Studies

Many researchers have studied how people make food choices using different perspectives. Most researchers recognize that food choices are influenced by biological, economic, social, psychological, and environmental factors. In most food choice studies, the researchers have examined one or a few of these factors and studied food choice using theories and hypotheses they developed before they involved participants in the study. These study results are strongly shaped by the perspective that the researchers took.

We have taken a different approach. We have used in-depth interviews to try to understand how people experience food and eating from their perspectives. The interviewer asks open-ended questions and engages in a conversation about food choice so that the participant does most of the talking. Second interviews are often conducted to gain more detail. The research data consists of many pages of verbatim transcripts that are read, re-read, and discussed by the research team. Before coming to conclusions, the researchers make sure that the results that they report reflect the experiences of all the study participants.

The Cornell food choice research has focused on understanding individual variation in food choice in a developed society with a complex food system. We have been also interested in understanding variation within an individual in different situations. Our studies have included men and women living in New York State’s rural, suburban, and urban communities, and who vary in income, educational status, ethnicity, and household composition. Our goal has been to identify and understand the factors and processes involved in food choice in a way that will advance research and practice. The next sections describe the key research findings. The main ideas are also summarized in two figures, How People Explain Their Food Choices: The Food Choice Process Model (page 4) and Food & Eating Over the Life Course: A Food Choice Trajectory Model (page 5).

Food Choice & Life Course

The way that people think, feel, and act related to food over their life can be thought of as a food choice trajectory. Current meanings, feelings, and actions related to food are shaped by past events and experiences. People tend to keep thinking, feeling, and acting the same way until they have an event or experience that causes them to change.

Childhood experiences, upbringing, and family traditions are strong influences on how adults think, feel, and act related to food. Older adults may revert to some childhood food preferences. Reasons that people shift their trajectories include changes in relationships, resources, roles, health, living arrangements, location, access to food, and knowledge and skills.
Influences on Food Choice

Devine et al. 1998; Furst et al. 1996; Falk et al. 1996

People acquire many influences on their food choices through their lives. Some important influences are listed below:

- Ideals: expectations and desires that people hold for food and eating
- Personal factors: biological needs, food preferences, psychological needs, identities
- Resources: money, time, space, food preparation knowledge and skills, transportation
- Social factors: roles, relationships, and social settings in which they eat
- Context: foods available to them, food information environment

Personal Food Systems

Furst et al. 1996; Falk et al. 1996; Connors et al. 2001; Smart & Bisogni 2001

People simplify food choice by constructing personal food systems, the options, trade-offs, and boundaries they develop for eating in daily life. People have food choice values (such as taste, physical well-being, cost, convenience, managing relationships, and other considerations.) They negotiate and balance these values in different food situations and over time. They develop categories for foods and eating situations (such foods they enjoy and foods that are expensive) based on these values. They develop rules and routines for shopping, preparing, and eating in different situations.

Meanings for Healthy Eating

Falk et al. 2001; Smart and Bisogni 2001; Janas et al. 1996; Blake & Bisogni 2003

People construct their own meanings for healthy eating and develop individualized strategies for eating the way they think is healthy. Some definitions that people use include moderation, balanced life, nutrient balance, low fat, low calorie, meeting the food groups, organic, or fresh. Based on these definitions, people may classify foods and eating situations as healthy or unhealthy. To communicate effectively about nutrition, educators must understand the meanings and classifications that people use.

Social Aspects of Eating


Most people eat some or many of their meals with other people. The social aspects of food are important to people because they enjoy interacting with others. People also manage their relationships with other people through food and eating. New eating practices that do not work well in social situations are difficult to maintain.
How People Explain Food & Eating:  
The Food Choice Process Model

Carole A. Bisogni, Ph.D., Division of Nutritional Sciences, Cornell University

1) Life course events and experiences determine how a person thinks, feels and acts related to food

2) People acquire influences on food choices:
   • ideals (expectations and desires related to food and eating)
   • personal factors (biological needs, food preferences, psychological needs)
   • resources (money, skill, time, space, knowledge, equipment, etc.)
   • social factors (roles, responsibilities, relationships)
   • context (foods available, food information environment)

3) People simplify food choice by developing personal food systems (how they see their options, trade-offs, and boundaries for food choice.)
   • They negotiate food choice values such as taste, health, cost, managing relationships, and convenience.
   • They classify foods and eating situations according to their own meanings. They set priorities and balance.
   • They develop rules and routines for shopping, preparation, and eating in different situations.

References
Connors et al., Appetite 36:189-200, 2001

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1) The way people think, feel, and act related to food can be thought of as a food choice trajectory. Current meanings, feelings, values and actions are shaped by all past experiences. These meanings, feelings, values, and behaviors have direction and resist change.

2) Childhood upbringing, and family traditions may be very strong influences on the meanings, feelings, values, and behaviors. Older adults may return to childhood food patterns and preferences.

3) People often change their food choice trajectories when transitions occur in
   • Relationships
   • Responsibilities
   • Resources
   • Health
   • Living arrangements
   • Food knowledge & skills
   • Location
   • Access to food

4) Nutrition programs can provide life experiences that enable people to change their food choice trajectories. Educators must acknowledge the learners’ food choice trajectories and create learning experiences that enable learners to link new information to their trajectories.

References
Applying Food Choice Research to Practice

Our food choice research studies emphasize the need for practitioners to recognize the following things about food choice communications.

1) The ways in which a person thinks, feels, and acts related to food and eating are constructed by that person over time as s/he interacts with food, other people, and the environment. This applies to all aspects of food choice including the ways people acquire, prepare, serve, and eat food. The personal food system is how the person constructs the options, trade-offs, routines, and boundaries for food choice. The personal food system is shaped by a person’s life course, personal characteristics, and the social and physical environments in which s/he lives. The factors and processes involved in a person’s food choice are dynamic and situational.

2) To communicate in meaningful way with another person about food and eating, a practitioner must create a dialogue that makes sense in terms of how that person constructs food choice. Building this connection requires that practitioner to do the following:

- see the other person as the “expert” in his/her food choice;
- establish a setting and relationship where the other person feels comfortable explaining his/her own personal food system and the reasons s/he thinks, feels, and acts as s/he does;
- listen in a non-judgmental way and accept the meanings, feelings, and actions related to food and eating of their clients and the circumstances in which these occur; and
- be open to and respectful of the factors and processes involved in the other person’s food choice.

3) To respond to this person with professional information, support, guidance, or assistance, the practitioner must translate concepts and theories from nutrition science into messages that relate to the other person’s thoughts, feelings, and actions related to food.

4) The practitioner’s own thoughts, feelings, and actions related to food choice and eating and how s/he should interact with program participants area also constructed. Professionals’ “theories of nutrition” and “theories of practice” result both from their interpretation of nutrition science and also their view of the factors and processes involved in food choice based on their personal and professional experiences. The meanings they assign to foods and words, the food choice values that they hold, and their views about what is common sense related to food and eating have been constructed.

5) Nutrition programs can provide life course experiences that enable people to change their food choice trajectories. To be a positive experience, however, educators must establish rapport and convey their messages in a way that is meaningful to participants.
The Professional Development Tools

Many of the ideas and implications emerging from our food choice research are consistent with best practices in nutrition communication and counseling. However, most nutritionists-in-training do not take a course in nutrition counseling until the final years of study.

Students can benefit early in their training from familiarity with idea that individuals and societies construct how they think, feel, and act related to food and eating. Exposure to this perspective broadens students’ views beyond the simple dichotomy of what is “right” to think based on professional nutrition science and what “lay” people think. Many aspects of food choice are beyond the scope of traditional nutrition science. By recognizing the factors and processes in their own food choice, students gain understanding of how personal food systems are constructed. By learning how others explain their food choices, students gain exposure to the diversity of ways in which others have constructed their food choices.

It is easy for nutritionists to forget that we differ in several ways from non-nutritionists in how we think, feel, and act related to food and eating. We have been drawn personally to the field of food, nutrition, and health because we find the topics interesting or because of our personal beliefs and experiences. We believe that eating for good health is important to individuals and society. Through our training, we have learned to assign meanings to food based on chemical components that promote or interfere with health. We enjoy thinking and talk about these issues. Mixed with these professional orientations, however, are our personal beliefs about food and eating (e.g. the “right” ways to cook, what is a “proper meal”) that have resulted from our own upbringing and life course experiences.

At Cornell we introduce some of the food choice research ideas in the introductory foods class and the sophomore course on social science aspects of nutrition. Later in advanced courses, we build on these ideas to support skill development in nutrition communications and assessment of psychosocial factors shaping food behavior. The Expanded Food and Nutrition Education program has also applied our food choice models to the training of paraprofessionals.

Through these learning experiences, we strive to establish a setting for communication among nutritionists and between nutritionists and their program participants that encourages the expression and acceptance of different ways of constructing food choice. In addition, this setting promotes strong participant involvement in figuring out how new information and ideas (such as recommendations and recipes) apply to personal situations. The remaining pages of this publication share teaching tools that we have developed.
Educational Goals: To increase students’
- understanding of the factors shaping their own food choices
- awareness of and respect for the factors shaping the food choices of others
- familiarity with the concepts of personal food system (the way that a person constructs the options, trade-offs, rules, and boundaries for food choice) and food choice values
- appreciation for the different ways that people have developed for approaching food shopping, cooking, and eating

Learner Characteristics: Suitable for entry level students and paraprofessionals.

Teaching Setting: About 30 minutes

Learning Outcomes: By the end of this experience, students will have
- examined some of the factors shaping their own food choices
- explored the ways in which individuals are similar and different in food choice and the reasons for these differences
- explained how food choice routines and habits are linked to a person’s food choice values
- explored the ways in which people construct rules and routines for food choice

Materials
- The handout, “Rules and Reasons for Food Choice”

Instructions
1. Ask student to list a rule or routine they use for food choice in each of the settings listed. Then for each rule or routine listed, ask the students to give a reason. To get them thinking, you may want to give a rule and reason that you use in a specific setting. (Example, When I eat lunch at work, I usually ... because ....)
2. Ask students to share their rules and reasons with the person next to them.
3. Ask students to share some their rules and reasons with the whole group.
4. Discusses the rules and reasons that are shared, and then present the concepts of personal food system, food choice values, and strategies for food choice.
5. Extended activity: The students may be asked to group the reasons into categories that they make up. Students can do this using sticky notes or newsprint. The students can then present their categories of reasons. The leader then discusses what has been presented, relating the reasons to the food choice values in the model.
Rules and Reasons for Food Choice

1) List 1 rule/routine you have for food choice in each of the following settings. Then list the reason(s) for each rule/routine.

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<th>Rule or Routine</th>
<th>Reason</th>
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<td>Weekday lunch at work</td>
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<tr>
<td>Weekday evening meal</td>
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<tr>
<td>Eating out on weekend</td>
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2) Share your rules and reasons with another person. Listen to the other person’s rules and reasons. In what ways are they similar or different?

3) Now share what you have learned about rules and reasons with the larger group. Listen to what others have learned.
Educational Goals: To increase students’
- understanding of the events and experiences shaping their own food choices
- awareness of and respect for the experiences and events shaping the food choices of others
- awareness of the types of events and experiences that often cause people’s food choice trajectories to change

Learner Characteristics: Suitable for entry level students and paraprofessionals

Teaching Setting: Allow about 30 minutes

Learning Outcomes: By the end of this experience, students will have
- identified some of the continuities and transitions in their own thoughts, feelings, and actions related to food and eating
- explained some of the reasons for these continuities and changes
- compared and contrasted some of the continuities and changes that they have experienced with the changes and continuities that others have experienced

Materials
- The handout, “Continuities and Changes in Food Choice”
- The handout, “Food and Eating over the Life Course: The Food Choice Trajectory Model”

Instructions
1. Establish the context for this activity by giving the students two past time periods to think about. For college students, Time 1 can be “before college” and Time 2 can be “the prior year or semester.” For adults, Time 1 can be “childhood” and Time 2 can be “adult without children/spouse” or “before present job.”
2. Ask student to identify changes in food choice (thoughts, feelings, and actions) across the three time periods and the reasons for these changes. Then ask them to identify ways in which their food choice has stayed the same and the reasons for these similarities. To set a comfortable context, you may want to share a change/continuity that you have experienced and the reason for that change/continuity. (Example, Before I lived ... I used to ... because ...)
3. Ask students to share their continuities and changes with another person.
4. Asks students to share some of the similarities and differences in changes/continuities and the reasons for these changes/continuities with the whole group.
Changes & Continuities in Food Choice

Time Periods for This Activity

1) Think about the three different time periods. How have you changed in your thoughts, feelings, and actions related to food across these time periods? What are some of the reasons for these changes?

2) Describe the ways your food and eating has stayed the same over these time periods. What are some of the reasons that you have stayed the same?

3) Share one change and one continuity in your food choices with another person. Listen to their changes and continuities. What are the similarities and differences between your experiences?
Educational Goals: To increase students’
- understanding of the events and experiences shaping their own food choices
- awareness of and respect for the experiences and events shaping the food choices of others
- familiarity with the concept of food choice trajectory
- awareness of the types of events and experiences that often change food choice trajectories

Learner Characteristics: Suitable for entry level students and paraprofessionals

Teaching Setting: Allow at least 30 minutes. The instructor should be aware that for some people exploration of the past may be uncomfortable because of difficult periods in their lives. Students should be instructed to only deal with areas of the past that are comfortable for them.

Learning Outcomes: By the end of this experience, students will have
- examined some of the continuities and transitions in their own thoughts, feelings, and actions related to food and eating over their lives
- examined some of the events and experiences in their lives that have caused them to think, feel, and act related to food as they do
- listened to some of the continuities and transitions in others’ food choice trajectories
- listened to the events and experiences that others have had that cause them to think, feel, and act related to food as they do

Materials
- The handout, “Your Food Choice Trajectory”
- The handout, “Food & Eating Over the Life Course: The Food Choice Trajectory Model”
- Supplies for creating food choice trajectories (chenille strips, newsprint, as needed)

Instructions
1. Share examples from your own past to explain continuities and transitions in food choice and the events and experiences that influenced them. Introduce the concept of food choice trajectory.
2. Ask the student to explore some aspects of their own food choice trajectories using one of the methods explained in “Your Food Choice Trajectory.” They can choose what they want to explore. The do not need to examine any areas that make them feel uncomfortable.
3. Ask students to share some aspects of their food choice trajectory with another student and to compare and contrast their food choice trajectory with that of others.
4. Ask students to share what they have learned about food choice trajectories. How
Your Food Choice Trajectory

1. Examine the list of life phases below and choose those that apply to you.

2. For each life phase, answer the food choice questions.

   **LIFE PHASES**
   - Childhood
   - Teenage years
   - Out on your own
   - When you became interested in nutrition
   - Marriage or partners
   - No children
   - With children
   - Other important phases related to food and eating

   **FOOD CHOICE QUESTIONS**
   What was food and eating like in these life phases?
   - What did you like/dislike?
   - What did you typically buy, cook, and eat?
   - What was important to you and others at that time?
   - What were the reasons you did the things you did?
   - In what ways are your food choices today different and the same as that life phase?

   *Note: Sometimes food memories make people feel uncomfortable. You do not have to dwell on any periods of your life or answer any questions that make you feel uncomfortable.*

3. Use one of the following ways to describe your food choice trajectory:
   ⇒ **Build.** Make a chain of chenille strips of different colors to represent the different periods of food choice in your life. OR
   ⇒ **Draw.** Use newsprint to draw a time line of the different periods of your food choice. OR
   ⇒ **Write.** Create a food biography report that describes your food choice trajectory and the important transitions that have occurred.

4. Share your food choice trajectory with another person. Listen to a description of this person’s food choice trajectory.
   - How are you food choice trajectories similar and different?
   - What are the reasons why food choice trajectories change? Stay the same?
Creating Food Choice Dialogues  Instructor’s Guide

Educational Goals: To increase students’
- skills in asking clients open-ended questions about the psychosocial processes involved in food behavior
- skills in creating a dialogue with another person so they can understand how that person experiences and perceives food choice

Learner Characteristics: Suitable for advanced students who are concurrently involved in a course in nutrition communications and counseling.

Teaching Setting: In this learning experience, students practice asking open-ended questions with follow-up probes. The students can then use the publication “Creating Food Choice Dialogues” as a resource for other activities that practice nutrition assessment and counseling skills.

Learning Outcomes: By the end of this experience, students will have
- explored questions and probes that can be used to engage clients in a dialogue about the factors and processes in their food choices
- explored the different factors and processes involved in food choice of others

Materials

Instructions
1. Assign “Creating Food Choice Dialogues” as a reading prior to class.
2. In class, review the concepts of the Food Choice Process Model and the importance of asking open-ended questions followed by probes. Explain how different types of questions relate to different factors and processes involved in food choice.
3. Model asking open-ended questions followed by probes using examples from “Creating Food Choice Dialogues.”
4. Ask pairs of students to interview each other using open-ended questions followed by probes using ideas from “Creating Food Choice Dialogues.” Assure students that they do not need to respond to any questions that make them feel uncomfortable. The interviewer should not probe further if the interviewee tells them they do not wish to explain more.
5. In a group setting, ask the students to share their experiences in trying out the open-ended questions. What did they learn from the interviewee? How did the questions work? What did the interviewees think about the process?
6. Suggest that the students use “Creating Food Choice Dialogues” to develop their own interview guide (set of questions and probes) for other class activities.
**What Do You Mean?**

**Instructor’s Guide**

**Educational Goals:** To increase students’
- awareness that meanings for common words in food choice communication are constructed by individuals
- skills in probing on meanings people hold for different words used in food choice conversation

**Learner Characteristics:** Suitable for advanced students who are concurrently involved in a course in nutrition communications and counseling

**Teaching Setting:** This learning experience asks students to articulate their own meanings for different words used in food choice conversation and practice asking questions to understand the meanings that others hold.

**Learning Outcomes:** By the end of this experience, students will have explored the individual ways that people construct meanings for words commonly used in food choice conversations

**Materials**  No special materials

**Instructions**

1. Ask students to write down their own personal meanings for “healthy eating,” “convenient,” “tastes good,” “high quality,” “low cost.” “what my family likes,” and any other words that you think might be interesting to discuss. Ask students to explain the reasons that they define the words in that way.

2. Ask students to share their meanings and reasons with each other in groups of two or three. Ask students to compare and contrast the meanings and the reasons for the similarities and differences among students.

3. Ask the class to share what they have learned in a large group. How do they think that the terms would be defined by other people such as their parents, siblings, non-nutritionist friends, or grandparents?

4. Ask the class to brainstorm strategies that practitioners can use with program participants and clients to understand the meanings that they use for these words. Discuss the importance of understanding how program participants construct meaning for terms when we work with participants in nutrition education.

Selected Food Choice References


