Food Behaviour: Taking a Life Course Perspective

The lives of people are like young trees in a forest. They are being choked by climbing vines. The vines are old thoughts and beliefs planted by dead men.

SHERWOOD ANDERSON, "Seeds," The Triumph of the Egg

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A life course perspective

- A multidisciplinary study of people's lives, structural contexts, and social change.

- A life course is defined as "a sequence of socially defined events and roles that the individual enacts over time" (Giele and Elder 1998, p. 22). Time, context, process and meaning are central concepts.
  - Expresses the summation of a persons experiences and the meaning attributed to these experiences.
Life course perspective in medicine & health

Medics have framed health issues around the concept of the ‘future self’

explore the extent to which an adult’s health status is shaped by biological, social, economical and psychological processes that begin at the pre-natal development stage.

Visions of future self (A)
healthy, happy, thinner/fatter, stable relationships, wealthy, successful, needed

Visions of future self (B)
Chronic illness, poor quality of life, drug dependant, a burden on other, stable relationships
The life course perspective and food

Considers the extent to which adult food choices are shaped by biological, social, economical and psychological processes that begin at birth.

Actions of today are based on the cumulative experiences of the individual intertwined with their personal characteristics and situational context.
Food choice trajectories

Macro Context (economy, culture, government, society, food system)

Micro Environment (family, friends, school, work….)

“persistent thoughts, feelings, strategies and actions over the lifespan” Devine et al.

(Source: Furst et al.)
Key macro and micro contexts of the elderly in IRL

Macro contexts:
- Knowledge & Awareness
- Economic development
- Food system & culture

Micro contexts:
- Early food experiences
- Social contexts (e.g., family, work)

Source: Delaney & McCarthy, 2010
Trajectories create momentum

• Trajectories provides momentum leading to **habitual behaviour**
  – They affect how a **person adjusts** to life course transitions

• People’s **life course experiences affect** major **influences on food choice** such as ideals, personal factors, resources, social contexts and the food context.

A valuable framework for considering food decisions

(Source: Furst et al.)
Ideals

Beliefs and expectations that people have about food and eating

Culturally learned
Sub cultural differences

Proper meal

Morality

Good & wholesome

Process foods

Health

Generosity

A good host

Good gruber

 Portions

Socialising

Body image
Personal factors

- **Basis** for the *unique and individualised construction* of food choices – what make choices differ...

  - Physiological factors
  
  - Psychological or emotional characteristics
  
  - Identity and self-concept – gaming sub-culture members – ‘we are not foodies’
Resources

- Resources are the available assets - a **restraining factor** in food choices

- Resource types
  - **Tangible**: Socio-economic conditions (e.g. income), equipment (e.g. freezers), and space,
  - **Intangible** *Human capital* and *Social capital* (Help from others, advice and emotional support)

- Resources fluctuate over the life course – e.g. current recession
Changing resources

Transition due to unemployment

Food choice trajectory
# Social and Context

Most eating occurs in groups:

- **Managing eating relationships**
  - In the home: Partners/children
  - Outside the home: social etiquette

Environments in which people make food choices:

- Physical surroundings
- Seasonal and temporal climate – eating what is season
- Food and nutrition system
- Social institutions and policies - food information
Consequences of life experience - Elderly IRL

**Over 60’s construction of their food choices:**

- Personal values - oriented towards security
- Norms – treating, value natural, health linked to appetite, generosity through food, manners
- Intergenerational effect: everyday treating, meaning of natural, appetite and portion size...
- Meaning of healthy diet, appetite, lifestyle – natural, home grown, sacrifice....
“Personal food systems are the mental processes whereby people translate influences upon their food choices into how and what they eat in particular situations” (Furst et al, 1996)

Values are a set of factors important when making food choices. - Personally developed meaning and associations over the life of the individual for food and eating
Creating personal food choice systems

- **Classify foods** in situations- healthy, cheap – bundle of attributes that must be considered together in given situations

- Involve **value negotiations**: consideration of the relative importance of sensory, monetary, health/nutrition, convenience, social relationships and quality of food choice decisions in given settings.

- **Behavioural strategies**: Strategies employed to **simplify** the food choice process developed over time. - short-cut rules

Understanding how these emerge
The trade-offs

Classification

**Chilled pizza at home:**
- Healthy – better than chipper
- Fresh
- Tasty
- Convenient
- Cheaper than EO
- Will be eaten by the children

- **Social/managing relationships**
  - Enjoyment

- **Price/value**
  - Convenient

- **Healthy**
  - Natural

- **Unhealthy**
  - Processed
  - Tasty
  - Convenient
  - Cheaper than EO
  - Enjoyed by the kids
Some thoughts on the implication of life transitions
Transition: Pregnancy as a life event

- Greater **attention on diet**
- **Open** to diet related **information**
- Adjust behaviours – e.g. **give up** alcohol, **cut out** certain food, **add** in other food
  - Adjustment to dietary behaviours ‘doing it for the baby’ – **sacrifice?**
  - Adjusting physical activity - Doing it for an easy birth
- **Normative behaviours** – **social pressure**

Meaning:

**ACTIONS ARE FRAMED AROUND ‘BENEFIT FOR OTHERS’ AND BEING ‘THE RIGHT THING TO DO’ THUS ‘NOT ENJOYABLE’ AND POSSIBLY NOT SUSTAINABLE IN THE LONGER TERM**
Response to this new situation is embedded in the past experiences of the individual and personal factors (such as resilience, identity, need for order..)
Time the new resource
Case of newly unemployed females:

- Reverted to the **homemaker ideal** (as constructed based on early life experiences):
  - Planning and preparing – time and efficiency in RM
  - Knowing your butcher – maintaining quality
  - Desire for ‘good foods’ none of that ‘processed stuff’
  - Bolstering cooking skills- cooking from scratch, using left over's
Income the lost resource
Case of newly unemployed females

- **No sense of purpose** – identity linked to work:
  - Disorganised and lost
  - Boredom – lost sense of identity – “it is comfort eating...you eat a packet [of biscuits] in a day because you have had 40 cups of tea”
  - **Disorganised offer** driven: “I just eat what is on offer, I do not think about nutrition anymore”

- **Maintain current trajectory**
  - **Economise** elsewhere: “Less money is no excuse to skimp on food”
  - **Shopping around**: Buy on offer and freeze
Resource: changing value negotiation

• Evidence of change:
  Increase market share for food discounter
  (2008 **36% growth** in Lidl and Aldi sales).
  – Shopping around – deal seeking
    • Time...
  – Brand preferences shifting: loyalty to
    brand buying on promotion
    • Taste, quality....
  – Looking for basic products from
    yesteryear – life values around
    security

Sources: Neilsen, 2009; Garner, E. 2009, TNS World Panel
Conclusion

• In the context of food choices current consumption patterns are individually constructed and thus to understand dietary choice patterns is challenging.

• **Trajectories** have momentum and thus may operate against efforts to change.

• **Ideals** have a significant role to play in the assessment of the healthfulness of foods and consumption behaviours.

• **Situational factor** are a central determinant of behaviour.

• The **trade-offs** minimise the likelihood of **mass market** demand.

• **Targeted** initiatives will reap returns – understanding the target markets core need and trade-off evaluations is central. Best interventions will be situated within the broader life of the individual.

• Offering health through FF... **Carrier-ingredient congruency** imperative. Technology application (degree of **unnaturalness**) needs to be considered.
Ongoing research on the Irish population

HRB Centre for Health and Diet Research

National Adult Nutrition Survey
Thank you....

Questions

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