Understanding Healthy Food Access Among Childcare Workers: A Qualitative Analysis of Food Shopping Experiences

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Background: Early childhood education settings are a major focus of childhood obesity efforts. Front-line childcare providers – predominantly low-wage earning females – are expected to implement healthy eating guidelines. Yet, workers’ own food access and experiences that shape their contexts and behaviors have not been well-addressed.

Objective: To explore perceptions of local food environments and access to healthy foods among childcare workers in New Jersey.

Study Design, Setting, Participants: Semi-structured interview guides were developed using a sociocultural framework. Focus groups and interviews were conducted with childcare workers (n = 25) about their food shopping practices, foods available at their regular stores, and affective and interpersonal experiences while shopping.

Measureable Outcome/Analysis: Open coding for all focus groups was conducted in NVivo by the same researcher to identify themes from the interviews/focus groups.

Results: Major themes affecting food needs and access were: household composition, life stage, convenience, budget constraints, satisfying multiple children, and coping with overweight/obesity. Experiences of discrimination (“they’re like, do you have money for that?”) and perceived unsafe environments (“I won’t go to [supermarket] because I’m uncomfortable driving down there”) were reported as disincentives to shopping at particular stores. Themes of judgment were prevalent (“they don’t want people to see them using their [EBT] card” and “they look at you like you don’t belong there”). Some participants avoided stores due to such experiences and perceptions, while others pushed through barriers to satisfy family food priorities.

Conclusion: Childcare workers have complex, heterogeneous histories, practices, and perceptions regarding food access embedded in their relationships with food. Understanding and supporting their healthy food access could reduce nutrition disparities and strengthen their effectiveness in implementing childcare center policies. Future research should focus on a greater understanding of the perceptions of the grocery shopping experience of low-wage workers.

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Validation of a Stage of Change Algorithm for Plant-Based Protein in College Students

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Background: A validated Stage of Change (SOC) algorithm is needed for Transtheoretical Model-informed interventions designed to increase consumption of plant-based protein.

Objective: To use dietary intake as a validation of a newly developed plant-based protein SOC algorithm in college students. The algorithm included the target behavior “Do you try to incorporate plant-based proteins as your main source of dietary protein?” with the 5 standard SOC temporal response categories.

Study Design, Setting, Participants: Consenting students (n=119) ages 18-24 from introductory Nutrition classes in a Northeastern college. The NCI Diet History Questionnaire III (assessment timeframe previous year) and SOC algorithm were the primary study instruments.

Measureable Outcome/Analysis: t-tests or X² for demographic and MANOVA for dietary variables comparing stages (Pre-Maintenance [PM] and Maintenance [M]) M was used instead of the standard post-action stages (Action and Maintenance) due to the Questionnaire time frame. Mean±SD are reported for continuous variables.

Results: The distribution of the sample was 79.8% PM, 20.2% M. There were no differences in demographic variables: age 18.8±1.3 years, race/ethnicity (84% White), sex (80.5% female). There was a multivariate effect for dietary variables (Wilks Lambda) F(6,111)=6.2, p<0.001. There were univariate effects for %animal protein PM 66.2±10.0, M 51.2±17.7, F(6,116)=30.1, p<0.001; %vegetable protein PM 33.8±10.0, M 48.8±17.7, F(6,116)=30.1, p<0.001; dietary fiber (g) PM 19.7±12.05, M 31.0±20.5, F(6,116)=11.7, p<0.001; total fruit (c) PM 1.2±1.1, M 1.9±1.3, F(6,116)=6.9, p=0.01; total vegetables (c) PM 1.7±1.2, M 3.5±3.8, F(6,116)=15.8, p<0.001 but no effect (p>0.05) for % kcal protein PM 15.0±4.2, M 15.3±4.2.

Conclusion: Participants who perceived that they were in Maintenance for plant-based proteins consumed less animal protein and more plant-based protein as well as more fruits, vegetables, and dietary fiber than students who perceived they were not. There were no differences in overall protein intake. These results provide empirical validation for the use of this algorithm in college populations. Additional research is needed to determine if the plant-based SOC algorithm is valid in diverse populations.

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Who Are Nutrition Educators? Insight From the Online Masters of Science in Nutrition Education at American University

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Objective: Explore characteristics of those interested in advancing a nutrition education career and identify preparedness upon graduation.

Use of Theory or Research: Both employment and career readiness are indicators of success for degree-granting programs. Variation in learning modalities and attention to peer-to-peer, peer-to-instructor, and peer-to-material learning opportunities provide for a desirable

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learning experience and increase career readiness. The Masters of Science in Nutrition Education (MSNE) program incorporates these principles to prepare nutrition educators. 

**Target Audience:** MSNE Alumni from American University, who graduated between 2015-2022.

**Course/ Curriculum Description:** The MSNE is a 30-credit program completed in 20 months or less. Students complete 10, 8-week courses asynchronously online, developing skills to become nutrition educators. This program equips students with a foundation in nutritional science and education and communication skills to design and implement nutrition education programs, share scientific knowledge consistent with current recommendations, incorporate communication strategies such as social marketing, and develop program and intervention skills.

**Evaluation Methods:** In order to better understand interested students and their career success following program completion, an alumni survey was conducted in February of 2023. The survey was sent to 245 students who graduated from the MSNE between 2015-2022, with 59 students responding in a 1-week period providing qualitative and quantitative data. 

**Results:** The alumni respondents resided primarily in suburban and urban locations (91.7%) at the time of enrollment and ranged in age from 21-55. Undergraduate degrees ranged from applied mathematics to nutrition to English Literature. Among graduates surveyed, 81% felt moderately or very prepared for a career in nutrition upon graduation despite only 26% of respondents having a background in nutrition. Over half (53%) of the respondents sought out the program due to interest in making a career change, and upon graduation, 71% of students were working in a nutrition and/or health-related position. 

**Conclusion:** This program, thoughtfully designed to combine the foundations of nutritional science with an emphasis on nutrition education, prepares students for careers in the field of nutrition. 

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**SNEB Nutrition Educator Competencies:** Food and Nutrition Policy

**Advancing Food Policy Councils Through SNAP-Ed: From Readiness to Capacity for Future Sustainability**

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**Background:** Food policy councils (FPCs) develop and move forth recommendations for changing policy, systems, and environments (PSE) for strengthening the food system. Increasingly FPCs are active in food equity and obesity prevention efforts. More investigation is needed to understand the readiness, outcomes, and sustainability of these groups.

**Objective:** The study aimed to assess readiness to start or expand a FPC; determine change in multi-sector and priority population engagement and the facilitation of PSE changes adopted as a result of FPC efforts over time; and explore capacity for future sustainability of FPCs.

**Study Design, Settings, Participants:** Representatives from seven FPCs funded through SNAP-Ed in South Carolina participated in the mixed methods study from February 2021 to 2023.

**Measurable Outcome/Analysis:** Semi-structured interviews based on an established readiness framework were analyzed thematically. Tracking forms for multi-sector and priority population engagement and PSE adoption based on the SNAP-Ed Evaluation Framework and the Community Engagement Continuum were tabulated across months. Scores using the Program Sustainability Assessment Tool were calculated by domain.

**Results:** Motivations included to build upon existing work, improve food security and healthy food access through policy, and engage community members. Current and needed capacities included internal and external buy-in, resources, and unforeseen challenges to overcome. FPC engagement from all sectors increased. The most prevalent sectors reported were business, government, emergency food providers, and libraries while philanthropy, planning, and attorneys were the least prevalent. FPC engagement with priority populations increased with “inform” and “consult” being the most and “delegate” being the least prevalent levels reported. Additionally, twenty-two PSE strategies were adopted. Sustainability scores were highest for the partnerships and adaptation domains and lowest for the strategic planning and funding stability domains.

**Conclusion:** FPCs increased sector and priority population engagement over time and were successful in PSE adoption, though opportunities for technical assistance exist to expand engagement. SNAP-Ed and similar program implementers should also focus supports provided on ensuring long-term sustainability of FPCs.

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**Analysis of Consumer Cooking Spray Usage and Perspectives in Free-Living and Laboratory Settings**

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**Background:** Nutrition facts labels provide important nutrition information and inform dietary choices. However, studies indicate that reference amounts customarily consumed (RACC) that determine serving size/label contents are not always representative of actual consumer use. Notably, U.S. cooking sprays have a RACC/serving size of 0.25 seconds; this small serving allows products to...

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