

SPAGHETTI JUNCTION: MULTILEVEL ENVIRONMENTAL PERSPECTIVE ON FOOD CHOICES

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A wealth of empirical data on food choices and interesting theories about associated cognitive and affective processes are available. However, there has been little integration of theories and data across levels of inquiry.

This presentation will review the available literature on some of the social and environmental influences on individual food choices. Calorie labeling on fast food menus, mass media campaigns, food advertising and marketing, food pricing, portion sizes, cultural values, neighborhood food retail access, and food policies are some of the social and environmental strategies that are discussed.

Interesting theoretical and empirical work is presented to illustrate how researchers might frame questions using study designs that conjoin two or more levels of influence on food choices. Research of Blundell and of Ebbeling exemplify theory and data that span multiple levels of inquiry by examining interactions between the individual and the environment. A “hazardous” food environment in which energy dense foods in large portion sizes are easily available increase the risk of overeating and excess weight gain, and this risk is more pronounced among susceptible individuals.

Interesting new research approaches will examine interactions among levels of influence on individual food choices. How do people with different personal food value systems respond to specific environmental influences on food choices? Through what mechanisms? Are there new measurement instruments that can enable data to be collected at levels that were previously inaccessible? How can theory guide the selection of multilevel conjunctions to frame new research questions, paradigms, and study designs?

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