

## **FAMILY FOOD DECISION-MAKING: AN ECOSYSTEMS PERSPECTIVE**

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This presentation will review the family food decision-making framework (Gillespie and Gillespie, 2007); discuss the overlapping context in which family food decisions are made and interactions among systems and environments; and describe our engaged research methodology. Families play an important role in children's socialization about food, eating, and health and well-being.

The family food decision-making cycle was generated from grounded theory research (i.e., grounded in the experience and understanding of families). Also, it was informed by decision-making theories. Zey views decision-making as a complex system that includes rational action, decisions based on emotional feelings, and decisions based on habit. Moral and emotional actions may have fundamentally different sources of valuation and different explanations than actions produced by rational choice. Family Food Decision-Making is a series of socially situated processes, whereby families seek to meet their nutritional, social, and taste preference needs of their members. Family food decision-making processes include an array of simultaneous activities related to acquiring, transforming, and consuming food. They range from explicit to implicit: (1) choosing from the foods practically available; (2) negotiating limits on family resources and trade-offs among competing food and eating goals; (3) choosing where to acquire particular foods; (4) developing strategies for mobilizing family food resources, such as how foods will be acquired, prepared, and presented; (5) creating the contexts for eating at home or eating out; (6) choosing with whom to eat; and (7) and enacting family roles and interaction patterns.

Most food decisions become routine over time and through repeated experience with similar food events. Food routines are established patterns of food acquisition, transformation, and consumption, and food policies are the implicit and explicit shared rules relating to food. Food routines are shaped by family food policies and interactions among family members and with their external environments. Daily decisions, based on rules and routines, continue until a change occurs in the micro or macro environments. Such changes lead families to question established ways of thinking and practice; they may attend to their food decisions more consciously and begin to consider other alternatives. The level of thoughtful decision-making will vary from event to event because decisions are influenced by family members' available time, information, and their collective decision-making skills. Once engaged in conscious decision-making processes, families begin to consider the "practically available" alternatives for meeting their food goals. The family food decision-making cycle includes: (1) identifying a food event that required considering alternatives outside the usual routines and established food rules; (2) identifying and assessing alternatives perceived to be available to meet family goals; (3) deciding by evaluating and choosing among alternatives; and (4) implementing the chosen alternative. Considerations involved in these processes may include the normative-affective as well as the rational. Family goals are shaped by preferences, shared values, and experiences. Food events provide contexts in which food and eating goals and priorities are applied and particular situations are judged to be more or less in line with those goals and priorities. For

some families, this requires trade-offs among goals of family members or among competing food and health goals.

Once sufficient alternatives that meet some family goals are identified, they are weighed (consciously or not consciously) according to criteria such as utility, perceived feasibility, and opportunity costs. Weighting of alternatives varies depending on the resources available, the decision-makers' knowledge of these resources, their abilities to access them, and whether they are able to expand alternatives by overcoming constraints. An alternative is chosen based on these considerations. Successes and failures in implementing decisions influence future decisions. If the outcome of a particular decision is satisfactory to all, over time it may become part of the family's food policies. If an outcome is unsatisfactory, the decision may be reconsidered. Collective memories influence future decisions.

To better understand the role of families as functioning entities in interaction with their micro and macro environments, the food decision-making cycle is imbedded in an ecosystems framework (Gillespie and Gillespie, 2007). The ecosystems framework addresses family food decision-making as a function of the family system within community food and health systems. In this framework, family members interact among themselves considering individual goals and food and eating preferences as well as the opportunities and constraints of community systems. In this framework, family members interact among themselves considering individual goals and food and eating preferences as well as the opportunities and constraints of community systems. This food decision-making research is based on the presuppositions that reality is constructed, humans have free will, and the purposes of research include structural change as well as behavioral change.

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