

CONSTRUCTING FOOD CHOICES

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Food choice decisions are multifaceted, complex, and dynamic. Many disciplines and fields offer perspectives about decision making, particularly psychology, economics, and philosophy. There is no single unified decision theory, but instead there exist a variety of theories about decision making. Several social science meta-theories (Ritzer, 2000) can be applied to food decision making. Rationalism assumes that deciders exercise agency, are self-interested, and calculate/weigh optimal costs and benefits of decisions. Constructionism assumes deciders exercise agency as they experience, interpret, manage, and negotiate decisions. Structurism assumes that holistic institutions constrain/determine decisions of individuals who are embedded within social structures. Each of these perspectives offers particular insights and is useful for understanding, explaining, and predicting some aspects of food decisions, but each perspective also makes limiting assumptions that produce less adequate consideration of other aspects of food decisions.

We used constructionist perspectives to inductively develop a model of the food choice process that offers a way to organize the broad scope of factors and processes that individuals use in making food choice decisions (Furst et al., 1996). This food choice process model includes (1) life course events and experiences that establish a dynamic individual food choice trajectory (2) influences on food choices that include structures categorized into ideals, personal factors, resources, social factors, and contexts, and also (3) a personal food system where deciders construct and interpret values that include taste, convenience, health, cost, relationships, and others; negotiate and balance selected values; and manage and perform food choice scripts and strategies (Sobal et al., 2006). This food choice process model may be useful in designing and implementing food policies and programs, and planning and conducting nutrition education and counseling.

References:

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