

**CONTRIBUTIONS OF THE LIFE COURSE PERSPECTIVE TO RESEARCH
ON FAMILY DECISION-MAKING: SOCIAL CONSTRAINTS
AND INDIVIDUAL AGENCY**

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The purpose of this presentation is to describe and illustrate the contribution of the life course perspective (e.g., Elder, 1998) to understanding family decision-making on nutrition. The presentation will review basic organizing concepts that comprise the life course perspective but will primarily focus on concepts that have relevance to family decision-making: (1) continuity in family relationships and rituals across time (trajectories); (2) transitions that may encourage behavioral change; (3) cultural and contextual influences on intra-family dynamics and on dietary behavior; (4) the role of early life experience in dietary behavior; (5) community and social class as constraints on family decision-making; and (6) agency, choice, and influence of family members on decision-making. Illustrative findings also will be presented from a study in progress on dietary behavior in a diverse sample of lower income working parents. This presentation also will comment on implications for research, policy, and practice, taking into account the practical barriers of applying such a complex perspective in research and practice.

The life course perspective is the leading theoretical orientation for the study of patterns of lives as they unfold over time. This theoretical perspective has been increasingly used to study health and health behavior across the lifespan in fields such as public health, medicine, sociology, and education. Its increasingly wider use in studies of health and health behavior is evidence that life course theoretical concepts can be used to: (1) bridge disciplinary boundaries between the health and social/behavioral sciences; (2) promote or create research on family decision-making and food choices; and (3) promote translational research on family food choices that will bridge between basic research and practice. The life course concept of *trajectory* provides insight into the stability and continuity of dietary behavior across time, both individual-level and family-level. Research on family *transitions*, defined as changes in family roles and responsibilities, can provide valuable insights into the challenges that families face and how they adapt to them. *Cultural and contextual influences* are evident in both dietary behavior and in family rituals and relationships that may reinforce a particular set of dietary choices. *Early life experiences* that have formed dietary preferences also are important contributors to understanding family food choices. *Community and social class* are important constraints or facilitators of health behavior in general and also have an impact on family dietary behavior. *Agency and choice*, defined as conscious decisions that people make to improve their health or well-being, play an important role in balance to social factors that may constrain dietary choices.