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What's for Dinner? How Factors that Potentially Influence Self-Efficacy Affect the Dietary Habits of Low-Income African American Mothers

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Keywords: African Americans, Cooperative Extension, critical race theory, SNAP-Ed, social cognitive theory

Abstract: This multi-site qualitative bounded case study explored factors that affected the dietary habits of low-income African American mothers. Using the theoretical framework of social cognitive theory and critical race theory, the findings captured the behavioral, personal, and environmental factors 15 mothers perceived as influencing their dietary habits.

Introduction

Created to improve the quality of life of citizens through education, Cooperative Extension was an early adopter of adult education principles, practices and theories (Van Hise, 1915). Because of its experience in adult education, and its respected reputation in communities, it was a natural conduit for administering the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Education Program (SNAP-Ed), (USGAO, 2004). Funded by government dollars, it required mechanisms of accountability that supply outcomes to justify its existence. Recently, the effectiveness of the SNAP-Ed program has been challenged and research has emerged to address concerns. This SNAP-Ed research loosely falls into two categories: quantitative studies that document the physical characteristics of participants and qualitative studies that probe the habits of subsets of the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) population or examine specific interventions used. Few of these studies explored the specific perceptions of African American mothers who qualify for SNAP, formerly food stamps (Satia, 2009). This is a significant population of concern for Extension educators charged with supplying SNAP-Ed interventions for urban community agencies, such as public housing.

Problem

A common theme throughout the current nutrition education research literature illustrated a need for more effective educational interventions that recognized the internal and external factors influencing the dietary habits of individuals who qualify for SNAP. One government report made three recommendations: ensure services are developmentally appropriate for learners, develop theory-based educational approaches that are learner focused, and consider the context of the services (USGOA, 2004). These recommendations were consistent with adult education principles, practices, and theories and cooperative extension's mission and vision. This researcher found a paucity of research that provided insights into how to address these programmatic needs, and even less research that would assist extension educators seeking to provide effective interventions for SNAP-eligible African American mothers.

Theoretical Framework

Contento (2011), noted that nutrition educators often begin with social cognitive theory (SCT) as a theoretical framework for interventions intended to increase self-efficacy, self-regulation and behavior change skills, such as those outlined in the SNAP-Ed *Guiding Principles*

(USDA, 2012). Originally introduced by psychologist Bandura (1986) and adopted in adult education, SCT is widely used because it described how personal, behavioral, and environmental factors interact reciprocally to influence habits. Personal factors included people's thoughts, feelings and attitudes. Behavioral factors included their self-regulating skills and knowledge. Environmental factors included external physical and social influences. Self-efficacy undergirded these three factors as the motivator that described the confidence one had to complete the intended behaviors and defeat barriers to desired habits (Bandura, 1986).

However, SCT failed to address how race, a social factor, might affect the behaviors of low-income African American mothers. Critical race theory (CRT), on the other hand, challenged educators to acknowledge the affects of racism on people of color. It shifted the focus from the learner's cognitive internal processes to generally accepted phenomena in the society that contributed to oppression, injustice, or inequality for one segment of society while benefitting another segment (Bell, 1987). Therefore, CRT was an appropriate mechanism for unraveling perceptions that may influence the dietary habits of low-income African American mothers. Specifically, this study explored how four tenets of CRT--race is endemic, historical context is foundational, narratives are informative, interest convergence is essential--interfaced with SCT to explore the dietary habits of these mothers (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001).

While quantitative data extracted from national surveys and databases described the poor dietary habits of low-income individuals, the literature revealed little information about the factors low-income African American mothers perceive as affecting their dietary habits. This study addressed the gap between what quantitative nutrition research showed about the dietary habits of this population and their perceptions of factors that influence those behaviors. Using their voices, it provided a portrait of this population in the context of their lived experience. The guiding research question asked: How do factors that potentially influence perceived self-efficacy affect the dietary habits of low-income African American mothers? Sub-questions (SQ) asked: What personal, behavioral, and environmental factors do low-income African American mothers perceive as influencing their dietary habits?

Methodology

This study used a qualitative bounded multi-site case study research design that allowed the researcher to delve into the inner experience of participants and explore how meanings are formed within the culture, rather than merely testing variables (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). A multi-site case study research design allowed the investigator to explore a bounded system, such as public housing, over time through detailed, in-depth data collection that involves multiple sources (Merriam, 2009). To answer the research questions within the theoretical framework, multiple data sources were used: information screenings, behavior checklists, semi-structured interviews, windshield tours, geographic maps, and the researcher's journal. Multiple data sources provided triangulation and increased internal validity.

A purposeful convenience sampling from an urban Midwestern city allowed the researcher to connect to the desired population. Three resident association presidents from three public housing sites participated in a pilot study to modify the research design and assist in recruitment. Five mothers from each of three housing sites, 15 total, participated. Each woman granted consent, provided basic demographic information, completed a behavior checklist, and participated in a 30- to 60-minute semi-formal interview. For each windshield tour, the resident leader and one study participant from the site accompanied the research team on a drive within a one-mile radius of the neighborhood to observe the built environment. Using an inductive constant comparison approach of data analysis, the semi-structured interviews were coded and

compared with the supporting data. The emerging themes were then aligned with the theoretical framework to answer the research questions.

Findings

The overall research findings revealed a reciprocal interaction between behavioral, personal, and environmental factors that affected the participants' dietary habits. The findings also showed how race interacted with these factors. A brief discussion of the findings follows.

SQ1: What behavior factors do low-income African American mothers perceive as influencing their dietary habits? Two main behavioral factors emerged, knowledge and skills. Knowledge included what the participants believed they knew and where they believed they gained that knowledge about meal planning, purchasing, and preparation; food safety; and dining out. All the participants said they learned most information related to their dietary habits from family, including close friends. One mother explained, "My mom and my grandmother really kinda' put me and my sister in the kitchen around 11 or 12." All but one participant credited the media for their knowledge. Another related, "In the daytime I do Rachel Ray and them." Few named health professionals and community classes as primary sources of information.

Skills included meal preparation, resource management, grocery shopping, food safety, and dining out choices. The participants expressed confidence in resource management ("I use all the advertisements"), grocery shopping ("I try to stock up when I can find it at the lowest possible price"), and meal preparation ("I plan my meals around my meats"). Without referring to recipes, most of the participants described how they seasoned meats before cooking, a possible cultural habit. However, the findings showed a gap between their food handling practices and recommended food safety practices (USHHS, 2010). Some participants washed raw meat, let food thaw at room temperature, and set meat and dairy out for more than two hours.

Regarding the selection of places to eat out or dining out choices, participants based their choices on their preferences, with most choosing a fast food burger restaurant and almost half choosing a family restaurant. During the interviews only one woman reported visiting a gasoline/convenience store. During the windshield tours, the participants cited these stores as popular because of convenience, proximity, and ability to use SNAP benefits. The windshield tour verified the participants' reports of no fast food or family restaurants within a one-mile radius of two sites, with geographic barriers to the restaurants for residents in the third site.

Despite their confidence in basic cooking and resource management skills, most (10) of these mothers cited factors that presented challenges or barriers potentially affecting their dietary habits. The barriers included fatigue ("It's just, if I'm tired . . ."), motivation ("So there are days you don't feel like cooking"), and lack of knowledge ("I have a tough time because one of my kids on a low-cholesterol diet").

SQ2: What personal factors do low-income African American mothers perceive as influencing their dietary habits? Attitudes and beliefs emerged as the personal factors that affected dietary habits. The participants expressed attitudes about their food preferences, desires/delights, fears/frustrations, and personal racial identity as well as their cultural racial identity. All of the participants described their food preferences ("It's not much I don't like"), and most (14) expressed an enjoyment for cooking ("You know, I enjoy preparing meals for the family"), and a desire to encourage healthier eating ("I wanna make sure they're eating right"). Only about half the participants thought about healthy food choices when planning meals.

Fear and frustration surfaced when most (10) of the participants discussed their transportation challenges ("When I'm with somebody, they want to rush me"), health concerns ("I don't wanna get high blood pressure."), and picky eaters ("So I want them to be healthy, but I

don't want to force them.”). Attitudes about race generated mixed responses. While most of the mothers (11) denied that race personally affected their dietary habits, saying things like, “I don't think food should define you,” most (14) believed there were foods unique to the African American culture.

All the participants said routine personal and family eating behaviors influenced their dietary habits. Most (14) said health issues influenced their dietary habits. They believed some health issues restricted their food intake, such as high blood pressure and because of their race they were at a greater risk for chronic disease. Most (14) wanted to make healthier dietary choices and most (14) believed some foods were more healthful than others, even though over half did not habitually consider the healthfulness of foods.

SQ3: What environmental factors do low-income African American mothers perceive as influencing their dietary habits? Economic, social, and physical environmental factors emerged as factors influencing their dietary habits. Most (14) said limited financial resources restricted their ability to purchase and prepare the foods they wanted. “When I had more money, we ate better.”

The family and others surfaced as an influential social environmental factor. All expressed ways family members influenced their dietary habits, which overlapped with the behavior and personal factors that affected their dietary habits. Most (14) discussed the influence of children on dietary habits and most (13) referred to the influence of mothers or grandmothers. Most (10) also named others as affecting their dietary habits.

The physical factors cited most often in the interviews were (a) the neighborhood had no access to quality food and (b) grocery stores were too far away. The geographic maps showed no food retail stores in a one-mile radius of two sites. The small supermarket shown a mile from the third site was accessible only by car unless residents walked through a wooded area. Only gasoline/convenience stores and discount dollar stores were within one mile of the sites. The closest small supermarket was two to four miles away from the sites. The closest large supermarket was three to five miles away. During the windshield tour, residents credited their elected official for planning to build a discount supermarket near two sites. Related to the limited food access was the lack of adequate public transportation. There were no convenient bus routes to a supermarket.

How do factors that potentially influence self efficacy influence the dietary habits of low-income African American mothers? These findings, in their voices, indicate a reciprocal interaction between factors that affected their dietary habits. Although this study did not measure self-efficacy, according to SCT, and other nutrition research, these factors can potentially support or delimit self-efficacy (Bandura, 1986; Contento, 2011). Behavioral knowledge and skills are associated with a strong perceived self-efficacy. Personal attitudes and beliefs are associated with either a positive or negative perception of self-efficacy. Economic, social, and physical environmental factors possibly strengthen or threaten perceived self-efficacy (Bandura, 1986). According to CRT, listening to the narratives of these mothers in the context of their lived experience suggests that some behavioral, personal, and environmental factors that threaten self-efficacy may be related to systemic policies that have resulted in inequities in these low-income communities (Martin, 2004).

Implications for Practice

Although this study, framed in a theoretical framework of SCT and CRT, initially provided insights for Cooperative Extension SNAP-Ed educators, it can assist any educator preparing to teach diverse learners. A discussion of implications for practice follows.

1) Understanding the behavioral factors of learners would assist educators in designing services tailored to the developmental needs of the learners. Before initiating any learning intervention, adult educators should dialog with the potential learners, hear their stories, collect their narratives, and understand their learning needs (Freire, 2009; Sheared, 1999). This requires abandoning program-planning methods that ignore the learner's experience, such as using standardized scripted curriculum. It also requires relinquishing reliance on measurement tools that describe behavior without considering the complexity of factors that affect that behavior.

2) Understanding the personal factors of learners would assist educators in developing learner-focused educational interventions. Before implementing a curriculum, educators should partner with learners to explore personal beliefs and attitudes that potentially affect behaviors. According to CRT, this encourages educators to avoid biases and assumptions that general knowledge is universal (Zamudio, Russell, & Bridgeman, 2011). For instance, the *Dietary Guidelines* (USHHS, 2010) recommend not washing raw meat, but some study participants believed washing the meat was necessary. Rather than chiding the participant, the educator could consider strategies that encourage a safer practice within the learner's belief system.

3) Understanding environmental factors that affect dietary behaviors would assist educators in designing context-specific programs. By spending time in the community before the program-design phase, the educator could learn about the community infrastructure and use the expertise of the learners to design effective programs. Windshield tours of the community allow key informants to provide rich information about their lived experience. In this study, it was during the windshield tours that the researcher realized an absence of food retail stores and inadequate public transportation made increased consumption of fruits and vegetables difficult. Beyond gaining awareness about the environment, the educator should collaborate with the learner to discover community resources to facilitate eradication of barriers to healthy food choices. In this study, the mothers explained how their local elected official brought an affordable grocery store to the neighborhood--an example of interest convergence. Educators in similar settings could join the resident learners in organizing community resources to eliminate environmental barriers that affect the dietary habits of the low-income community.

Summary

This study represented an attempt to address the gap between what researchers knew about the dietary habits of low-income African American mothers from quantitative research and the lived experience of this population. The study findings supported Bandura's belief that before behavioral changes could occur, factors that potentially influence behavior must be considered. Although the study did not measure self-efficacy, the findings revealed factors that potentially support or threaten the self-efficacy regarding dietary choices. The study findings supported CRT tenets insisting that race matters and the stories told by participants provided alternate explanations for their dietary habits.

The implications are that educators must avoid designing programs using the deficit model that concentrates on the poor dietary habits of the population and ignores the experience this population brings to a classroom. Many of the strengths, indications of their positive perceived self-efficacy, surfaced in the stories the participants told, even as their weaknesses emerged. Their lives were complex, not merely numbers and percentages, and listening to their stories provided clues for educators charged with designing effective programs for diverse audiences. The study findings were an initial step toward understanding how factors that potentially influence self-efficacy affect the dietary habits of low-income African Americans.

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