

Lauren Bollier

NFSC 429

May 4th, 2009

Childhood experiences and Adult Eating Patterns

Abstract

This qualitative research project takes a look at the correlation between childhood experiences and adult eating patterns. One would assume that what a child is taught about eating and any experiences they had as a child in relation to food, will carry on into adulthood. Two male participants were chosen and two female participants were chosen for this research. All the interviews were conducted as professionally as possible and were all one on one; there were no group discussions. Each interview lasted between twenty and thirty minutes. Each participant was very open to discussion and was able to open up about their relationship with food. Both the males and one of the female participants remember their parents embracing healthy food, while one female participant explained that health and nutrition was never a major influence on her childhood. All participants remember eating out as a child; one female participant recalls it being a frequent occurrence, at least three times a week. Both the females experienced a divorce between their mother and father. One female used food as comfort during this time, the other restricted her food intake. One male experienced the death of his father, but doesn't recall ever eating food as a way to cope with his death; rather he barbequed constantly, just like his father had. The other male moved from a big city to a small town in high school, and recalls his eating habits to change a little bit during this time. All recalled that they started making their own food decision starting in either middle school or high school but now more so in their college career. Both females and one of the males live on their own, and the other male lives with his parents.

Introduction and Literature

Adult eating patterns can range anywhere from what is considered to be normal, to a diagnosed eating disorders. How eating patterns develop in adults is thought to be strongly correlated to past childhood experiences. How one is raised and the experiences one goes through can have an effect on their eating habits and patterns as a child as well as into adult hood. I want to explore more thoroughly and on a personal level if certain experiences in ones' childhood, lead to the eating behaviors and patterns that they have today.

Research shows that overweight children who were often teased by their peers and family often were lead to experience disordered eating and dieting problems as they became adults. Research also showed that those who were teased as a child will have more body dissatisfaction when they are older. (Rosenberger, P.) During my research I tried and explored if any of my participants were teased growing up or went through a traumatic experience and try to find a correlation between that and their eating habits that they have today. Negative experiences may not be the only thing that leads to the eating patterns that one has. Growing up in a family that doesn't embrace eating healthy can have an effect on an adults eating pattern when they are older; especially if they aren't educated on the importance of nutrition. If a child grew up constantly eating out, those tendencies might carry on into adulthood. Through my research I will explore topics about the importance of health in their household growing up.

Food is often used as a positive reinforcement with children. Parents can use treats as a reward for children; especially when trying to get them to do chores or finish homework. Using food as a reward for children can influence their eating patterns when they are an adult. It can teach them to reward themselves with food every time they accomplish something. In the article, "If you are good you can have a cookie: How memories of childhood food rules link to adult

eating behaviors,” the researchers explain that there is a higher occurrence of adult bulimia when food was used as a reward for good behavior in their childhood. (Puhl & Shwartz, 2003) I asked my participants if they ever felt their parents used food as a reward in certain situations.

Food is also often used when one is feeling a certain emotion; whether it is sadness, happiness, depression, stress. College students can have very distorted eating patterns, due to money issues, time management, stress and other factors that might influence their diet. It will be interesting for me to see if there is any correlation with their eating patterns now and their childhood; or if their eating habits just reflect their hectic lifestyle being in college.

Methods

With the four subjects that I have chosen, I have close relationships with all of them. I tried to choose people who I have noticed over the past few years, who have an obvious relationship with food; whether it being a good relationship or a bad one. For this particular research project I decided to have two females and two males as my informants. They are all in their twenties and attend school either full time or part time and two of them have part time jobs as well. Participant #1 is a twenty-three year old white female who goes to school full time and doesn't have a job; her parents fully support her. She is from the Sacramento area and lives with one other roommate. She has a larger frame size than the other participants and appears to be overweight.

Participant #2 is a twenty-three year old white female college student, who is about to graduate in May and works part time. She is from the Bay Area and also lives with one other roommate. She has a medium frame and appears to be fit.

Participant number #3 is a twenty-four year old white male, who attends college full time. Currently, he is living with his parents, but has lived on his own once before. He has a medium frame size and height and appears to be fit.

Participant #4 is a twenty-three year old male, who attends college part time and works part time as well. He is of Italian descent and lives with three other males college students. He is of medium height and weight.

All the subjects were asked the same exact questions in the same exact order. Some participants gave longer answers and explanations than others, giving me more information to work with. The questions that were asked are shown in table 1.

Table 1:

Qualitative Research Interview Questions
<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. How do you remember meals being prepared for your family?<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Did you sit down as a family?• Who did the cooking?2. What kind of restaurants do you typically remember eating at?<ul style="list-style-type: none">• How big of an influence was fast food on you and your family?3. Were you ever rewarded with food?<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Did your parents use food as a positive reinforcement?• What kinds of foods were you rewarded with?• How did you feel when you were rewarded?4. When is the earliest age you remember starting to make food decisions on your own?<ul style="list-style-type: none">• If you were at a restaurant without your parents or at school, what would you chose to eat?5. How do you feel about yourself now as an adult making food choices on your own?<ul style="list-style-type: none">• What do you typically eat?

- How often do you eat out?
6. Any memories that stick out involving food?
 - What types of foods were involved?
 - Was it an occasion?
 7. Do you find yourself giving into “fad diets”?
 - Which ones have you tried?
 - Do you think they work?
 8. Describe your relationship with food?

Each interview lasted no more than thirty minutes and depending on the participant, I was able to gather more information with some than others. I tried to use the probe questions shown in Table 1 as often as I could. I tried to carry on the conversation as long as I could, as long as the participant was willing and felt comfortable. The more comfortable the participant was, the more he or she spoke, and therefore I was able to gather more information. The females were more elaborate with their answers and were more willing to engage in conversation. The males participated, but didn't seem too interested in the topic. I think food and eating habits is related to body image, and women care about body image, so they were more willing to speak about their habits and beliefs about food.

Once I finished conducting my interviews I took my field notes that I had for each participant and typed them up. I tried to find certain correlations between all the subjects and the answers that they gave me.

Results and Discussion

Females and Parents Divorce

The most common theme from this discussion and research was that the females had more of a relationship with food, which stemmed from past experiences and were way more aware about it and their body/health. When asked if they remember any memories about food when they were younger, both the females recalled that their eating habits changed when their parents got divorced.

Participant #1 was my most interesting informant. She recalls always being heavier set growing up and can remember her weight gradually growing when her parents got divorced. She said the divorce was very hard on her mom and her as well and she used food as comfort during this time. Now, whenever she feels any kind of emotion, whether it be stress, sadness or happiness, she finds herself constantly reaching for food. When she thinks about her parents divorce, it upsets her and she will reach for food.

Participant #2 seemed to be pretty well educated about food and nutrition, without having any educational background on it. She recalls turning away from food when her parents got a divorce. She went through a stage where she was very picky, but soon learned that this wasn't a way of life. After her parent's divorce, she turned away from food for a little bit, but soon after she became more willing to try new things. The cooking dynamic changed in her household once her parents got divorced. Her dad was the main cook in the family, but she only lived with him every other weekend. She now relied on her mother to cook for her and her siblings; but noticed that they started to eat out more.

Females and Fad diets

Growing up, participant #1 recalls that food was a huge part of her life, and her parents never really enforced healthy eating habits. Her mom would make dinner for her and her brother and they would eat together, but she would always reach for starchy foods like pasta, bread and rice. She admits to not really having any nutrition background and strongly relates her childhood eating patterns and experiences to the ones she has today. She finds herself eating out at least five times a week, sometimes twice a day. She explained that she loves the taste of fast food and finds it to be cheaper than going to the grocery store. She admits to trying fad diets; most recently Nutrisystem. She strongly believes these diets work, yet she can't seem to stick with them. She is always looking for a quick fix to her weight issues. She has tried Nutrisystem on three different occasions, but still is not happy with her results. She always ends up turning back to fast food when she doesn't see the results that she wants. Participant #1 finds it hard as a college student to be able to eat healthy, mainly because of the price of food and the amount of time it would take to make a meal. Participant #1 denies any clinical disorders.

Participant #2 believes that since her mother and father always made meals for her and her siblings and always made her pack a lunch for school, it has helped her to have good eating habits in college. She admits to never trying a specific fad diet and thinks a healthy eater incorporates a little bit of everything into their diet. At times she has contemplated about trying a new diet, but denies ever actually going through with it. She explained to me that she knows they "don't every work and would rather eat a variety of foods and not deny herself a specific food." Participant #2 denies any history of an eating disorder.

Females and emotional eating

Participant # 1, whose parents went through a divorce and didn't encourage health eating habits, now uses food a comfort mechanism. She explained that she would reach for food as a child, especially when her parents were going through the divorce. She continually reaches for food now, to suppress certain feelings and emotions that she goes through. She admits to finding herself reach for food when she is bored, stressed and upset.

Participant #2, whose parents did incorporate healthy eating habits as a child, doesn't find herself reaching for food for comfort reasons. She explained that she listens to her body and she doesn't eat when she isn't hungry.

Males and Life Changing Events

The males weren't as elaborate answering the questions but were all willing to participate. One male experienced a death of a parent and the other male went through a big move while he was growing up. At this point in their life, the males both agreed that these experiences changed their eating habits in some way. Participant #4, whose father past away when he was in high school, acknowledged that since his father was an avid barbequer, he continued to barbeque after his death and still does at least once a week. He finds himself eating out a lot and he also works at a restaurant and receives one free meal a day. He takes advantage of this, because he supports himself and will take advantage of a free meal. He admits to never really buying fruit, and his reasoning for this was the price of fresh fruit. He explained to me that he eats and prepares typical "male meals." Whether he is cooking or buying food, he tends to consume lots of meats, potatoes and on occasion, vegetables. He denies ever trying to diet or having an eating disorder.

Participant #3 went through a big move when he was younger. He moved from a very big city to very small city out in the country. This was a huge culture shock for him and he does

recall his eating habits to change a little bit. At the new high school that he attended in the small town, it was normal for all the kids to buy lunch. Once he entered high school he always bought lunch and realized that when he got his license he ate out a lot more. When he entered college he was on his own, and that's when he began to eat out a lot more. He is now living back with his parents and finds that his eating habits have changed once again. He feels that he eats healthier, because his mother prepares meals for him and his family.

Figure 1: How divorce changed females eating habits

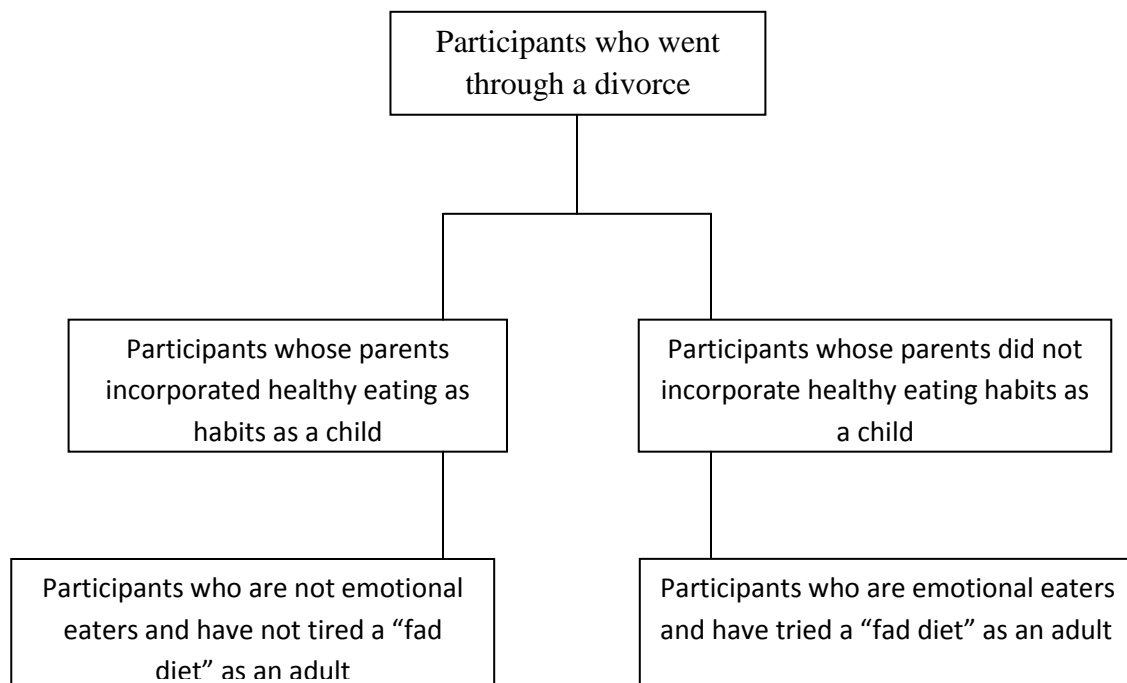
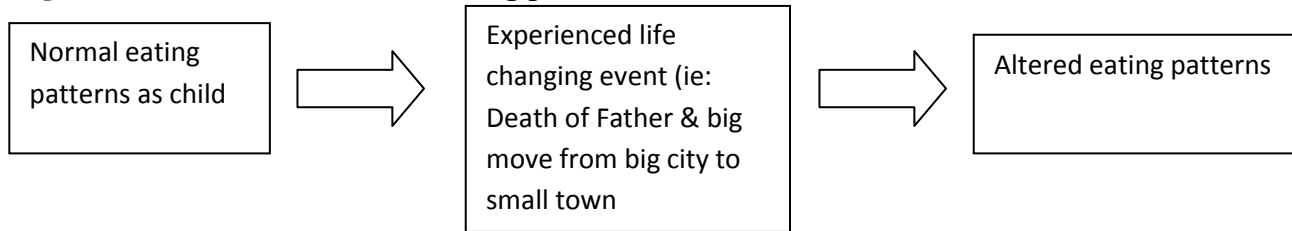


Figure 2: Flow chart of Male's eating patterns



There are a lot of limitations to this study. The study group was very small, only being four people and I also had a relationship with them, which may have helped or hindered my findings. The participants may not have been as open to me as they would with a professional and I also have preconceived notions about them and their eating habits from what I have observed over the years of knowing them. More questions could have been asked to find out more information.

Conclusion

From my findings I was able to see that all four of my participants went through some kind of childhood experience that resulted in a diet change. Two of the females experienced a divorce between their parents and saw that their eating habits had changed. One female turned away from food and the other used food as comfort; and still does until this day. Both the females had lots to contribute when talking about dieting and “fad diets.” Participant #1, whose family didn’t incorporate healthy eating as a child, admits to “fad dieting.” Participant #2, whose family encouraged health eating as a child, explained that she has never tried to “fad diet” and says she is educated enough to know that they don’t work.

One male experienced the death of his father who barbequed quite often and admitted that he barbeques a lot because it does remind him of his dad. The other male, made a huge move with his family from a large city to a small town. His eating habits changed then, and

continue to change now, when he moved out of his parent's house for a few years, and then back into their house.

If further research were to be done, I think I would have a larger sample size and try to incorporate more questions that weren't so broad. I would have also liked to spend more time with each informant; maybe have two or three separate visits with them. After each visit, they might get more comfortable talking to me, and I would be able to develop more research from them. I also could have a more diverse group of people and have participants of all age groups.

References

Puhl, Rebecca. If you are good you can have a cookie: How memories of childhood food rules link to adult eating behaviors. Eating Behaviors 4 (2003) 283 – 29.

Rosenberger, Patricia H., Associations of Weight-Based Teasing History and Current Eating Disorder Features and Psychological Functioning in Bariatric Surgery Patient. Obesity Surgery, 17, 470-47.