

A CASE STUDY ANALYSIS OF PERSONAL CONSTRUCTS AND AUTOPOIESIS IN FOOD CHOICE

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It has been said that the problem of what determines food habits and how they can be changed is of concern to the health of all mankind. The problem is amenable to theoretical analysis at many levels. The aim of this paper is to illustrate the explanatory power of both Personal Construct Theory of Kelly (1955) and *Autopoiesis* of Maturana and Varela (1980) to analysis at the level of personal factors in food choice.

One approach to the study of personal food patterns is through the concept of *meaning* of food, or perceived personal relationships between people and their food. Personal Construct Theory helps to explain observations such as that an individual's selection of food is linked to perceived context of choice-situation. With this framework food choice, as an act of acceptance or rejection, is based on personal constructs which have no reference to a given 'reality' or world of any significance extrinsic to the mind of the selector.

This paper presents an expanded theoretical analysis of personal constructs about a particular event recounted by an overweight person who sought dietary counselling. A brief description of the event and an earlier analysis were reported by Bell *et al.* (1982). Here it will be argued that an understanding of the origins of personal constructs and why particular constructs are applied in specific circumstances requires an extension of Personal Construct Theory. Maturana and Varela's concept of *Autopoiesis* - the recursive self production of living systems - contributes to this extension.

Interpretation of the event in autopoietic terms suggests the following:

- (1) the food item in the scenario, fried fish, had specific meaning to the person in the particular context (personal constructs).
- (2) the circumstances in which the particular food item was perceived triggered a set of responses in the person which were determined by previous actions in similar contexts (structural coupling).
- (3) the outcome was inevitable while the person articulated (subconsciously) particular associations between the food item, herself and her mother (organisational closure, language).

Analysis of the results obtained from the application of these theoretical concepts to the event under consideration provides illumination on the problem mentioned at the outset. Further understanding of the origins and maintenance of patterns of food choice by individuals and groups, derived through the application of the theoretical framework described in this presentation, could provide a way forward in formulating nutrition policies and programs.

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