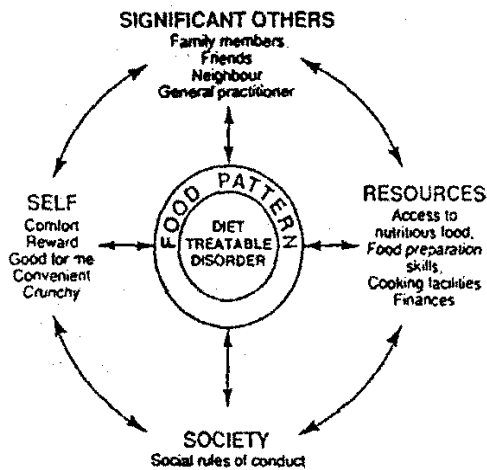


AN ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY OF THE INFLUENCES ON DAILY FOOD CHOICES OF PEOPLE TRYING TO LOSE WEIGHT

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The continuing notoriously poor prognosis of weight loss programs means that new strategies are required to develop a systematic understanding of food patterns that may lead to obesity. To date the study of food patterns has been limited to the analysis of the reported frequency of consumption of particular foods as obtained by questionnaire or interview. An ethnographic approach is needed to enable the investigator to gain a sense of the underlying beliefs (Bell et al. 1981), explanations and meanings that individuals or groups have for certain events in their lives. Such an approach gives insights into contexts of food choice - what was in the mind of the person at the time of food selection and consumption.

In this study we examined the food patterns of subjects (8 females and 2 males) who kept a diary of their food choices and the circumstances in which they ate their food, together with statements about how they felt about themselves at the times of eating, for a period of 12 weeks. The diary data were transcribed onto word processor and coded for the kinds of influence on food choice which derive from the components of our Systems Analytic Model (see figure). The Ethnograph, a software package, was used to search for recurring themes (patterns) in each subject's diary.



The systems analytic model for studying contextual influences on personal food choice decisions.

Among the findings of the study was that the influence of significant others and social rules of conduct were substantially represented as modifiers of an individual's food choices in particular contexts. This influence was reported by those who 'knew' what they should choose for weight control and who had unlimited access to appropriate foods. This finding requires further investigation and will constitute a major area of our research in the future.

Our computer-based qualitative research may lead to new understanding of the origins and maintenance of eating patterns, new insights into the apparent intractability of obesity and to improved nutrition intervention programs at both the individual and community level.

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