



Change and Continuity in Low-Income Working Mothers' Food Practices for Young Children in Response to Life Events

Tara Agrawal¹ · Tracy Jean Farrell² · Elaine Wethington³ · Carol M. Devine⁴ 

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Abstract

Objective To understand how changes in low-income mothers' work, home, and childcare environments impact their food practices for young children.

Methods The grounded theory, theory-guided, design included two in-depth qualitative interviews (6 to 8 months apart) with each of 19 low income, working/student mothers of Head Start children, living in a rural county in Upstate New York. Interviews covered mothers' experiences of employment, school, family, household, and childcare events over one school year and whether and how events changed child food practices. Emergent themes related to mothers' experiences of life events, with attention to influences on child food practices, were open-coded using a constant comparative approach. A life course approach and a transactional model of the stress process informed interpretation.

Results Within the study period, most mothers reported at least one life event, with many experiencing one or more changes in employers, job schedules, residence, household members, or childcare situation. Emergent patterns of adjustment in child food practices linked with life events were shaped by mothers' appraisals of life events, the availability of coping resources, and their adaptations to events, based on temporal, financial, and social resources. The findings support a view of child feeding informed by the transactional model of stress.

Conclusions Instability in work, family, household, and childcare highlight changing contexts for child food practices in daily life. Research and practice should acknowledge the changing nature of the child feeding context and the need for children's caregivers to make adjustments in response to changing resources.

Keywords Life events · Instability · Young children · Food practices · Low income

✉ Carol M. Devine
cmd10@cornell.edu

Tara Agrawal
Tara.Agrawal@gmail.com

Tracy Jean Farrell
tjf6@cornell.edu

Elaine Wethington
ew20@cornell.edu

¹ Office of Community Health, Boston Children's Hospital, Landmark Center, 401 Park Drive, 6th Floor, Boston, MA 02115, USA

² Division of Nutritional Sciences, Cornell University, Savage Hall, Ithaca, NY 14853-4401, USA

³ Department of Human Development and Department of Sociology, Cornell University, MVR Hall, Ithaca, NY 14853, USA

⁴ Division of Nutritional Sciences, Cornell University, Savage Hall, Ithaca, NY 14850, USA

Significance

Demanding work and family conditions have been documented as child feeding challenges for low-income working parents, but these conditions have been conceptualized as stable characteristics in past research. The findings of this study revealed a pattern of instability in work, family, household, and childcare conditions, which formed an ever-changing socio-ecological context for how low-income mothers managed the day-to-day food and eating of their preschool children. At a time of increasing instability in the lives of low-income children, research, policy, and food assistance programs need evaluate responsiveness to low-income parents' changing financial, temporal, and social resources.

Introduction

Instability in work, family, and household environments, with limited money, time, and practical support for food and eating, challenge parents to maintain family routines and provide healthful choices for their children (Agrawal et al. 2018; Devine et al. 2009; Fulkerson et al. 2011). Work and family conditions have been conceptualized as time-stable characteristics in prior research (e.g. Crepinsek and Burstein 2004; Bauer et al. 2012), overlooking the dynamic nature of economic and systemic changes that shape children's diets. Changes in work and family conditions, such as job loss, moving, and divorce or separation are common among low-income U.S. women with young children (Bumpass and Lu 2000; Bishoff and Reardon 2014). These disruptive life events cause shifts in social, financial, and time resources which can destabilize the socio-ecological settings for children's health and well-being (Evans 2004; Kamp Dush et al. 2013). Instability, conceptualized as "abrupt, involuntary, and/or negative change in individual or family circumstances," can have negative consequences for children's growth and development (Sandstrom and Huerta 2013, p. 1). Little is known about how instability in work and family environments relate to mother's child food practices.

This study aimed to understand how low-income mothers' experiences of changes in key life domains (i.e. work/school, family, household, and child care) impacted their child food practices over a school year. This approach provided an opportunity to highlight adaptation in child food practices. In this study, child food practices are defined as daily patterns of food acquisition, food preparation, and food provisioning for young children at the household level (after Kaufman and Karpati 2007). Understanding changing child food practices in the context of parents' shifting work and family environments can reveal the resources needed to improve young children's nutrition.

Methods

The purpose of this analysis was to understand how low-wage working mothers managed food and eating for their preschool children over the period of a school year. This qualitative study used a grounded theory (Strauss and Corbin 1998, theory guided approach (Greene 1993) to gain an understanding of the phenomenon of interest from the perspective of participants. Grounded theory methods are systematic inductive guidelines for analyzing data to build theoretical frameworks that explain the data. A theory-guided approach acknowledges that the researcher begins

and conducts a research project with certain theories in mind. Theories of the stress process, the life events literature, and a life course perspective informed the interpretation of findings.

A life course perspective is a holistic way to examine people's lives over time. A life course perspective adds a temporal framework to understanding stress by examining how life events are organized and reorganized and how adaptations are influenced by contextual influences such as socioeconomic status and social relationships. A central concept of a life course perspective for food choice is that the development of an individual's food choices takes form over their life course to create a stable trajectory (Devine 2005). A food choice trajectory is characterized by having direction and momentum, includes thoughts, feelings, strategies and actions, develops over time, and reflects the context in which they are developed (Devine 2005). In the case of parents feeding their children, parents may make adjustments in how they feed children related to life events representing changes in their roles (e.g. divorce), residences (e.g. moving), and/or resources (e.g. losing a job). Considering life events in the context of the life course perspective provides a useful way to explore how changes in mothers' physical, economic, and social environments may help shape children's food and eating over time.

Although both mothers and fathers feed children, mothers feel more responsibility (Blissett et al. 2006). Mothers were purposively recruited through Head Start programs (Administration for Children and Families 2017) in a rural Upstate New York county who: (1) had a 3- to 4-year-old child new to Head Start, (2) spent at least 20 h a week at work or school, and (3) had varied living situations (e.g. living with child and another adult, or with child only). Study participants shared the same recent life event—a child entering a new school—and similar economic circumstances, but had diverse work and/or school schedules and home environments. The study procedures were reviewed and approved in accord with ethical principles by the Cornell University Institutional Review Board. Participants provided informed consent before interviews.

Mothers were interviewed twice in person. The initial interview, at the beginning of the Head Start year, included open-ended questions about mothers' work and family conditions (e.g. What kind of work do you do?), how they fed their child on a daily basis (e.g. Tell me about feeding your child.), and a qualitative recall of food and beverages consumed by the child the day prior to the interview. The second interview, 6–8 months later, asked about life events involving changes in work, family, household, and child care since the first interview; how these changes affected food and eating for the child; and the same qualitative food recall. Interviews were pre-tested with a convenience sample of employed mothers of preschool children.

One trained female interviewer (TAP) conducted all of the interviews at times and in locations chosen by participants. 1 h interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and verified. Participants were informed that the project was a study of how they managed food and meals for their Head Start child, allowing participants to clarify meanings and introduce individual interpretations. The interviewer probed to explore deeper meanings and took field notes about interview context, interactions, and quality. Pseudonyms protected participant identity.

This qualitative analysis is based on interviews with 19 mothers who participated in two in-depth interviews at the beginning and end of a Head Start school year. Three mothers could not be reached for a second interview and were not included. This analysis focused on mothers' descriptions of life events—particularly changes in work or school, living situations, childcare, spouse/partner relationships, and if applicable, spouse/partner job situations—and on changes in child food practices. Mothers' experiences were interpreted according to constructs drawn from a life course approach (Devine 2005), underscoring continuity and change in mothers' child food practices in response to life events; and a transactional model of stress (Lazarus and Folkman 1984), with emphasis on life events, appraisals and impacts on resources, and adaptations in child food practices.

Atlas.ti (Scientific Software Development, GmbH, Berlin, Germany), version 7, was used to identify, organize, and code data. The constant comparative method (Glaser and Strauss 1967) was used to iteratively develop conceptually coherent codes. The authors reached agreement on thematic saturation when interviews yielded no new information (Sobal 2001). Analytic steps included: (1) team transcript review by four members; (2) open coding of emergent themes by three of four members; (3) comparison of thematic differences in assessments of intervening life events; (4) delineation of adjustment patterns in child-related food practices over time among cases; (5) triangulation with qualitative recalls on children's food and eating as a practical check; and (6) peer debriefing and interpretation of findings in the context of existing research. This analysis followed the COREQ criteria for reporting qualitative research (Tong et al. 2007).

Results

At the first interview, participant mothers were 23 to 44 years of age; 18 self-identified as white and one as black, reflecting area demographics. Two of 19 mothers had completed a 4 year college degree; most had some college or less. Eleven mothers lived with a spouse or partner; three lived alone with their child; and five lived with their child and an adult relative; sixteen had more than one child.

Mothers Experienced Multiple Life Events Over a School Year

At the first interview, mothers revealed complex living, work, school, and childcare arrangements. Many mothers described temporary living arrangements with family and friends; plans to move; or recent separation from a spouse or significant other. A number of mothers expressed a desire for job changes that would allow them to work a day shift, give them more schedule predictability, pay, and provide benefits. All mothers relied on family and friends to care for their child while they worked or attended school, although this arrangement was sometimes dissatisfying.

By the second interview, 6–8 months later, all but one mother had experienced at least one life event; some mothers experienced as many as six life events. The most common life events were changes in mother's employment situation, specifically job schedule, location, or title (Table 1). By the second interview, six mothers had new jobs, four mothers were no longer working out of the home, and two mothers had enrolled in school. Three mothers had a spouse or significant other whose hours had increased and three mothers had a spouse whose hours decreased or lost their job. Another common event was change in where mothers lived and with whom they lived. By the second interview, five mothers had moved, four mothers had moved in with another family member, two mothers welcomed a new child, and two mothers had separated or divorced from their spouse or significant other.

Most changes in mothers' work, family and childcare situations impacted their child food practices. Only three

Table 1 Life events experienced by low-income working/student mothers between two interviews 6–8 months apart (n = 19)

Life event (n)
Job and/or school changes
New job, either part or full time (6)
No longer working outside the home (4)
School on hold or graduated (3)
Same job, cut back on hours (3)
Same job, better working hours but lower pay (2)
Enrolled in school, either part or full-time (2)
Home and family changes
Moved residence (5)
Moved in with another family member (4)
Gave birth to a child (2)
Spouse or significant other changes
Spouse or significant other job or school schedule change (8)
Divorced or separated from spouse or significant other (2)
Other changes
Change in childcare, including head start pick up (8)

mothers experienced no changes with significant impact on the ways they fed their child. Within this time period mothers also described changes in their child’s food preferences that were accommodated in the midst of life events.

Mothers Adapted Their Child Food Practices in Response to Life Events

Adaptations, defined as changes in the processes that underlie specific child food practices such as meal planning, food shopping, cooking, and cleaning, were linked with mothers’ appraisals of the impacts of life events in three areas—on their financial, time, and social resources, or all three

combined. Mothers’ appraisals of life event impacts on their child food practices ranged from positive to neutral to negative and sometimes mixed. Individual mothers appraised similar life events (e.g. moving) differently, depending on change context.

At the second interview, three mothers described the negative financial effects of disruptive life events on child feeding, e.g. “it’s a struggle right now.” The case of Laura (Fig. 1) offers an illustration of the ways she coped with feeding her child in the context of multiple work and family life events. Another struggling mother was no longer employed outside the home, and a third was caring for her spouse’s infirm grandfather living nearby. Mothers who were

Fig. 1 Child feeding strategy adjustment example: Laura, “It’s a struggle right now”

Domain	Interview 1	Life Events	Interview 2
Home	Rural farmhouse	None	Same
Household	Self, husband, 4 children	None	Same
Family	Partner works 1 job	-Job change, job schedule change	-Husband got 2 nd job, but fewer work hours
	Child with special needs	-Child behavior	-Respite worker 2/week
Her Work	Part time outdoor labor, makes own schedule	Car broke down	No longer working
Economic	Enough, no extras	No longer working	Not enough money for food
School	Full time student	On hold	No longer in classes

Appraisal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>I have [work] hours but I’ve got to have a way to get there. Luckily it’s flexible. I can work whenever I want. They have work for me but I have yet to be able to work [laughter].</i> • <i>[Not having money] limits our ability to get to a food pantry cause we don’t have the gas to get anywhere...It limits our ability to go [food] shopping.</i> • <i>The food stamps don’t last barely two weeks...When we don’t have any food stamps we have to use [my husband’s] paycheck to buy food and when there’s no paycheck and there’s no food stamps things aren’t good.</i>
Impacts on Resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>...And we stretch [food stamps] as much as we can and buy things that we can stretch with like rice.</i> • <i>[My husband’s] home more so he can cook more (laughter) which saves me. Nobody has to eat my burnt offerings.</i> • <i>[The respite worker] is a help because then both little boys are watched. Then I can actually focus on what I’m doing. It gives me a little extra time to oh, be a little creative [with the meal].</i> • <i>If the kids are hungry and they want a snack they don’t ask me. They run over and raid [my uncle’s] fridge. He’ll feed them whenever. If he’s home, if there’s food. There’s always something sitting out and they just go over there and get it. And it’s usually not very healthy stuff.</i>
Adaptations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>[One car and little money] limits our ability to go shopping...Normally, I would go to [discount stores], but the store downtown is really becoming one of our few options at this point and their prices are ridiculous and that’s why we cannot make the food stamps last is because we’re forced to shop there.</i>
Cut back on food, skip meals	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>What else can you do besides buy a huge bag of rice, buy flour ... the staples. That’s how we stretch. It’s not buying pizza, it’s not buying candy</i> • <i>I don’t cook breakfast because it’s just me and I’m not hungry and I’m trying to save what we have for dinners when everybody’s home.</i>
Quick and easy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>[The days my husband is not around] are a little more rough...I have no cooking skills - it’s always fresh food but I always make the easiest, fastest thing that I can possibly think of [laughter] and that doesn’t always go together but it’s food.</i>

no longer employed described new financial difficulties that impeded their ability to get food for their family, including insufficient food stamps and lack of money for gasoline to get to the store. The mother with increased caregiving responsibilities was also no longer able to sit and eat meals with her child.

Lisa, a single mother studying to become a dental hygienist with a daughter in Head Start and an older school-aged daughter, had moved and no longer held her temporary job by the second interview. Lisa appraised the mixed financial and temporal effects of these events in the following way:

When [my daughter] comes [to Head Start]...it really helps my food bill immensely...[Commuting]’s been a hard time because I haven’t had any income since January... this past month was really hard getting [my daughters] to and from school...When they’re in school now I can go shopping versus taking them with me because I was at work or I didn’t have time...since I am home I will definitely say that I’m more organized and I’m able to think more about things.

Three mothers described job schedule changes that offered them greater time for and predictability of meals, which allowed them to both make and eat dinner with their child “*pretty much every night*.” All three mothers lived with a significant other and had begun new full time jobs in the service sector that provided greater schedule predictability and financial resources for feeding their child. Two of these mothers commented that their children were eating new and different foods because their work hours were synchronized with their child’s mealtimes. In contrast, two single mothers had less time because of increased work or school hours and/or a significant other whose new work schedule overlapped with evening meals. One shared that she was making “*a lot more quick, throw together meals*” because of less time to plan, shop and prepare meals. Lynette, a part-time evening food retail worker who shared a vehicle with her live-in boyfriend talked about how changes in his work schedule since the first interview interfered with time for feeding her son:

[Feeding my son] is more rushed, I feel. Especially this year, just because [my boyfriend] started [work] earlier during like the daytime. He has to start earlier, and then he gets home later, which pushes my work schedule and his work schedule almost to clash...There’s a lot more “okay lets grab this, hurry up, make it, let’s go.

Two mothers described adapting to having less support (including from Head Start) in their child feeding, e.g. “*it’s more of myself doing it*.” These mothers had both stopped working outside the home or going to school, and their children were no longer eating at Head Start. These mothers each had a spouse or partner with increased seasonal work

hours, meaning less available help with meals. These mothers described mealtimes as “hectic” and shared how they felt “overwhelmed” because their spouse or partner often missed meals. These mothers felt that they were not able to offer the same food variety to their child as Head Start, and they were more likely to offer foods their child liked to manage stressful mealtimes. At the same time, these mothers felt that child feeding was less rushed since they were no longer working or in school.

Five mothers had more support, having moved in with a parent, sibling or friend with whom they were able to share household food responsibilities, with one mother describing feeding her child as “*it’s not just me*.” Laura, a home health aide who worked full-time described how moving from living with her cousin to with her best friend changed the way she shopped and cooked for her son and her son’s mealtime environment:

My best friend cooks, [smiles], ‘cause she’s like in love with cooking and she’s kind of like a health freak I’d say. So she cooks the meals. So yeah I think [my son’s food and eating] has gotten better... Yeah, she’s pretty good and he likes her cooking. I think he’s gotten a little bit better with eating and trying new things with her. Like he’ll try her food and if he doesn’t like it then he’ll eat what he likes and then be done... [Now] we split [food shopping] but like one day she will buy and then I’ll buy [the food], basically. Or like when I get groceries we just split it right down the middle....

Three of nineteen mothers reported no disruptive life events in the study period and “*not really a big change*” in their child food practices. These mothers’ work and family situations remained largely consistent over the Head Start program year. All three lived with other adults who helped prepare meals and feed their children when they were at work.

Discussion

These findings reveal an ever-changing socio-ecological context for how mothers managed their child’s day-to-day food and eating, in response to common life events: changes in job and work schedules, housing, living situations, and childcare.

These findings are consistent with a view of parental life events as framing a stressful environment for child development and health (Kamp Dush et al. 2013; Sandstrom and Huerta 2013). Instability in mothers’ work and family lives has received little attention in the child food and nutrition literature, although parental work and family pressures have been found to influence child feeding (Fulkerson et al. 2011; Bauer et al. 2012).

Use of a transactional model of stress (Lazarus and Folkman 1984) to understand children's food and eating illuminates differences in how parents assess and adjust child food practices in response to changes in environments featuring insecure, low-wage jobs with few benefits and unstable household situations. Coping with life events affects how mothers search for ways to fulfill their child feeding responsibilities. In the present study, life events did not affect all mothers equally. Mothers' appraisals of life events may have facilitated or hindered their child food practices in ways that are important for health. For mothers' who experienced increased demands on their financial, time, or social resources, coping with these demands made it a challenge to implement what they saw as desirable feeding practices for their child (i.e. sitting and eating together, home-cooked meals). Whereas, mothers who reported having more time to cook meals for their child remarked on how their child was trying new foods. Researchers should assess changes over time in households for a more accurate assessment of children's food and eating, as child food practices may not be stable over time.

These findings support a systems perspective of childhood nutrition, suggesting a model of child care that incorporates maternal stressors such as disruptive life events and feeding styles with children's eating behaviors and childhood obesity (El-Behadli et al. 2015; Swynnden et al. 2017). All parents balance financial, time, and social resources. However, for the low-income mothers who participated in this study, these resources were unstable and at times scarce. Mothers may trade off two or more valued outcomes in their child food practices when there is not enough time or money to achieve both. Having more money for food frequently meant trading greater work time for less time sitting and eating with their child. Conversely, more time for child feeding often meant less money for food because of reduced work hours or unemployment. Help from surrogates reflected changes in household living arrangements, including separation from a partner or moving residences. Time poverty, which has been defined as inadequate discretionary time available for investment in one's health and human capital, has been associated with fewer eating and drinking episodes (Kalenkoski and Hamrick 2013). The current findings illustrated how time poverty experienced by some of these low-income mothers was balanced against having enough money for food.

These findings suggest that disruptive life events are a part of daily life for many low-income families. In addition to the stressors described here, Laraia et al. (2017) have argued that stress, poor sleep and depletion of cognitive capacity, which may accompany disruptions, may interfere with healthful food choices. Non-standard work and residential moves have been associated with food insecurity among young children (e.g. Jacknowitz et al. 2015). Importantly, these findings suggest that nutrition and health interventions

should not just accept instability as a feature of daily life, but actively help families anticipate and plan for the impact of these disruptive events on food choices and feeding strategies. Food assistance programs are not responsive to the impacts of life events on families. Allowing for greater flexibility in eligibility requirements due to unexpected changes in work or family situations may help participants anticipate and adapt to changing circumstances. Adaptations in child food practices when others were no longer available to help, underscore the important role of others, beyond mothers, in young children's food and eating.

Study findings underscore the importance of the social-ecological contexts in which child-related food practice patterns develop and reflect differences in mothers' appraisals of their resources and confidence in their ability to carry out child food practices in changing circumstances. Instability in young children's experiences of their parent's lives and their household routines may challenge development of healthy food and eating behaviors. Unpredictable and unstable routines and household conditions undermine aspects of children's health and well-being including self-efficacy, feelings of mastery, and self-regulation (Evans 2004; Kamp Dush et al. 2013), and are disproportionately experienced by low-income children (Evans et al. 2005).

Study strengths include exploring changes in child feeding over time from the perspective of mothers with a variety of household circumstances and who were employed in low-level, hourly jobs with limited work-life supports. This approach enabled discovery of changes in mothers' financial, time, and social resources for feeding children and the ways that mothers assessed and adapted to changes. Limitations include a small sample of rural, mostly-white mothers. While it would have strengthened the study to collect specific information on children's food consumption, pilot work (unpublished) suggested that the burden of more detailed data collection would be unwelcome by these busy mothers. Children were enrolled in Head Start, including regular daytime meals and snacks. Families with children at home or in other types of care may have different experiences. Data collected at two time points do not document what happened between interviews.

Implications

These findings shed light on the unstable socio-ecological context for young children's food and eating, at a time when increasing numbers of low-income children experience changes in where they live, who they live with, and their parents' jobs (Bishoff and Reardon 2014). Changes in financial, time, and social resources that force mothers to re-balance may have positive or negative consequences for feeding young children. Nutrition interventions rarely

recognize the changing context of children's daily lives or parents' needs to adapt their child feeding practices to changing resources. Recognition of changing family contexts can help focus dietary advice on time-saving strategies, money-saving strategies, or both. Investigations of the influences on children's food and eating should explore changes in: parents' work and school situations as well as household situations, including partner status, living arrangements, and childcare. Food assistance programs and policies need to evaluate responsiveness to instability in work and family conditions among low-income families.

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