

# The many synonyms of “food choices”

Delve into the topic of diet and you are likely to find terms closely associated with “food choices”. For example, “food consumption patterns”, “dietary patterns”, “food practices”, “food intake patterns”, “food habits”, and “dietary habits”. All are used interchangeably with each other and sometimes with *food choices*. Although they are related, it is helpful to distinguish between the terms “habit” and “practice”, especially with reference to the sociocultural perspective.<sup>1,a</sup>

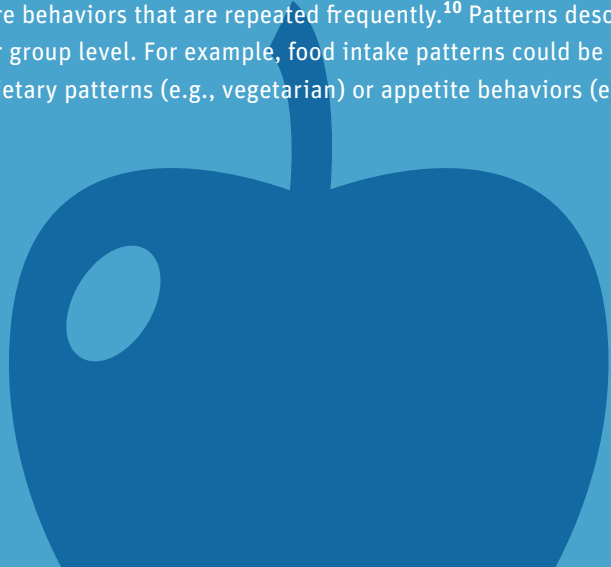
**Habits** – also called food culture or food ways. Food habits deal broadly with how food is obtained, distributed, prepared and combined, who serves it, when it is eaten (meal times) and who eats the food, and ultimately what is consumed.<sup>1,2</sup> Food habits are synonymous with food consumption patterns or dietary patterns.

**Practices** – are a collection of behaviors specific to a category (e.g., meal preparation practices, food hygiene practices, healthy eating practices, maternal care practices). Behaviors are observable actions.<sup>3</sup> Food choices are likewise observable actions (behaviors).

Food habits are broader than practices and food choices. Habits refer to cultural and social aspects of food, largely occurring at the macro-levels (community, region, national, ethnic groups, religious groups). Practices are more specific and variable, occurring at the level of the individual or of smaller groups. For example, you might find different types of food practices within one community. We often talk about household food practices, with some families having healthier practices than others.

If your head isn’t spinning yet, then there are the labels used to describe food choice research or food choice programs – which makes navigating this space a bit confusing. In the **Table** on page 10, we define the labels one is most likely to encounter when reading published literature on “food choice” in nutrition. Also, you will note that some labels are better suited for studying or changing food habits and food patterns, while others concern behaviors and practices.

**Note:** <sup>a</sup> If one draws on the behavioral or cognitive sciences, habits and patterns have different connotations. Habits are behaviors that are repeated frequently.<sup>10</sup> Patterns describe recurrent behavior categories (or habits) at the individual or group level. For example, food intake patterns could be used to describe meal patterns (e.g., skipping breakfast), dietary patterns (e.g., vegetarian) or appetite behaviors (e.g., picky eating).



## Selected labels used in food choice research

### Social Marketing

is an approach to studying and designing goods and services.<sup>4</sup> It is the application of marketing principles (audience insight and consumer research, audience segmentation, marketing mix) and marketing techniques to promote behaviors that will improve health or wellbeing.

### Behavior Change Communication (BCC)

is a term that describes an “evidence- and research-based process of using **communication** to **promote behaviors** that lead to improvements in health outcomes. With BCC, the focus is largely on the individual who enacts the behavior.”<sup>5</sup>

### Social and Behavior Change Communication (SBCC)

is a term that describes a “research-based, consultative process that uses **communication** to promote and facilitate **behavior change** and support the requisite **social change** for the purpose of improving health outcomes.”<sup>5</sup> SBCC draws on all levels of the social ecology theory: individual level, families and communities, as well as the social and cultural environments that enable social change.

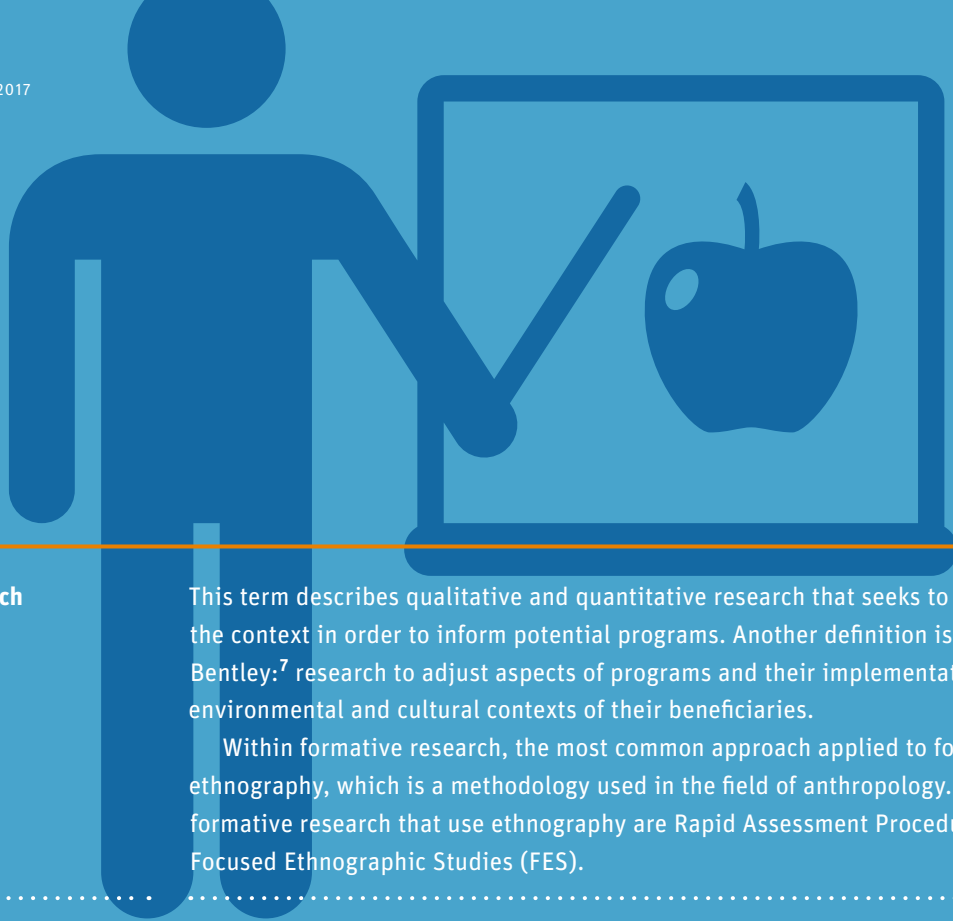
### Human-Centered Design

is an approach to “design **with** communities, to deeply understand the people they’re looking to serve, to dream up scores of ideas, and to create innovative new solutions rooted in people’s actual needs.”<sup>6</sup>

### Consumer Research

Research that uses qualitative and quantitative methods to understand the needs, motivations, and desires of consumers who are purchasing (or using) goods or services.





**Formative Research**

This term describes qualitative and quantitative research that seeks to understand the context in order to inform potential programs. Another definition is provided by Bentley:<sup>7</sup> research to adjust aspects of programs and their implementation to the environmental and cultural contexts of their beneficiaries.

Within formative research, the most common approach applied to food choice is ethnography, which is a methodology used in the field of anthropology. The types of formative research that use ethnography are Rapid Assessment Procedures (RAP) or Focused Ethnographic Studies (FES).

**Behavioral Economics**

A field of study that applies psychological insights to explain judgments and decision-making in the areas of finances, healthy eating, and other practices. Behavioral economics is based on the premise that human beings are non-rational actors, and that to make judgments and take decisions, we rely on **heuristics** (mental short-cuts) and are influenced by **biases**.<sup>8</sup>

**Nutrition Education**

is a subfield of nutrition, one that uses various strategies “that not only provide information and skills, but also foster motivation, growth and change. Nutrition education encourages critical thinking and reflection.”<sup>3</sup> Within nutrition education there are various strategies (i.e., counseling, peer education, adult learning principles) that can be used to encourage changes in food practices.

**Health Promotion**

According to WHO, health promotion is not focused on the individual but on the social and environmental changes that are required to achieve health.<sup>9</sup> For example, health promotion policy would look at improving wages, making public transport to markets more accessible, and introducing taxes or subsidies to support healthy food choices.

**References:** <sup>1</sup>Sanjur D. Social and cultural perspectives in nutrition. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1982. | <sup>2</sup>Mead MM. The problem of changing food habits. In: National Research Council (US) Committee on Food Habits. The Problem of Changing Food Habits: Report of the Committee on Food Habits 1941–1943. Washington DC: National Academies Press, 1943. | <sup>3</sup>Contento IR. Nutrition Education: linking research, theory, and practice. 3<sup>rd</sup>ed. Burlington, MA: Jones and Bartlett Learning, 2016. | <sup>4</sup>Weinreich NK. Hands-on Social Marketing: A step-by-step guide to designing change for good. 2nd ed. Thousand Oaks CA: Sage Publications, 2011. | <sup>5</sup>Manoff Group. Technical Brief: Defining social and behavior change communication (SBCC) and other essential health communication terms. Internet: <http://manoffgroup.com/documents/DefiningSBCC.pdf>. (Accessed 15 May 2017) | <sup>6</sup>IDEO. The Field Guide to Human-Centered Design. 2015. Internet: [https://cipe.yale-nus.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/sites/9/2015/12/IDEO\\_Field-Guide-to-Human-Centered-Design.pdf](https://cipe.yale-nus.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/sites/9/2015/12/IDEO_Field-Guide-to-Human-Centered-Design.pdf). (Accessed 12 May 2017). | <sup>7</sup>Bentley ME, Johnson SL, Wasser H et al. Formative research methods for designing culturally appropriate, integrated child nutrition and development interventions: An overview. *Ann N Y Acad Sci* 2014;1308:54–67. | <sup>8</sup>Thaler RH, Mullainathan S. Behavioral Economics. In: *The Concise Encyclopedia of Economics*. Library of Economics and Liberty, 2008. <http://www.econlib.org/library/Enc/BehavioralEconomics.html>. (Accessed 16 May 2017). | <sup>9</sup>World Health Organization. Health Promotion. [www.who.int/topics/health\\_promotion/en/](http://www.who.int/topics/health_promotion/en/). (Accessed 15 May 2017). | <sup>10</sup>Fiske ST, Taylor SE. *Social Cognition: from brains to culture*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Los Angeles: Sage, 2013.