

Exploring professional perceptions of healthy eating

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Background: Healthy eating, food, and health habits contain a richness of meaning within the dietetic profession similar to the population as a whole. Food is viewed broadly as both a commodity and source of nourishment, juxtaposed with reduction of foods to constituents and nutrients based on functionality.

Objectives: The objective of this research was to deepen our understanding of the roles food plays in the personal and professional lives of dietetics students and registered dietitians across Canada.

Methods: The meaning of food was examined through an exploratory qualitative study using the photovoice technique, which helped to identify individual perceptions and personal epistemologies and ontologies related to food roles in participants' lives. An unstructured interview guide facilitated 30-45 minute individual in-depth interviews with participants. The design consisted of three data collection phases with two student groups (winters of 2015 and 2016) and one dietitian group (winter 2017). Data were coded, placed into categories and then broad themes were established. Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) formed the basis of interpretation of the underlying meanings of participant perceptions.

Results: Participants included 10 students and 15 registered dietitians from across Canada. Dietitians and students identified factors affecting their perceptions of what constituted healthy eating, including barriers and enablers to food procurement, food preparation skills, and marketing myths, further exploring the impact these have on food as an asset for practice.

Conclusions: This study provides a unique perspective in understanding the constructions of healthy food and healthy eating in the dietetic profession in Canada.

Significance: Findings indicate a need to challenge common reductionist approaches to healthy food and to embrace the joys of eating, as noted in current national food guidance documents.