

# How Low-Income Parents Use Food to Create Meaningful Social Experience

Caitlin Daniel  
UC Berkeley Sociology  
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# Question

- How do parents in different socioeconomic positions decide what to feed their children?
- How might these decisions contribute to socioeconomic disparities in diet quality?

# Motivation: Social Judgment

## Woman A Leading Authority On What Shouldn't Be In Poor People's Grocery Carts

NEWS · Our Annual Year 2014 · Local · Poor · ISSUE 50·17 · May 1, 2014



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Source: *The Onion*

# Social Judgment





# Questions

- How do **economic resources** and the **meaning of food** shape parents' choices?



# Previous Work: Economic Influences

# Kids' Tastes and Food Waste

- Low-income parents see children's food rejections and the resulting waste as an economic loss
- Avoid introducing foods their children may not like to avoid the risk of wasting money
- The cost of food waste is not included in food-cost estimates



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Economic constraints on taste formation and the true cost of healthy eating





# How Low-Income Consumers View Price

- Low-income consumers experience food cost in ways that we might not expect
- Food-cost estimates diverge from consumers' experiences



## Social Science & Medicine

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Is healthy eating too expensive?: How low-income parents evaluate the cost of food

Current Work:  
*Taste and Necessity*

# Sociocultural Influences



Ok, let's see. Grapes. **They love** grapes. They are gonna be gone within a day, two days. But you know...



I always get cereal or CVS or Walgreen's. This week, the cereal **that my daughters like** — they had Honey Nut Cheerios, Golden Grahams [suspenseful pause] — \$1.67 a box. Compared to three-something.



Watermelon  
Green boiling bananas

They like those [Trix yogurts]. I let them put them in the freezer cos I can't afford when the ice cream truck comes down the street. All the kids are like, "I need a dollar! I need a dollar!" and all the ice creams are like \$2, \$3. I don't have a dollar. Even if I had a dollar, you still can't afford one off the truck.



*La Yogurt*

Sugar-sweetened beverages

Ice cream



Stew beef  
Rice noodles  
Oyster sauce  
Snow Peas  
*Culantro*

It **feels good** to me when my kids [say], “Mummy, are you gonna cook tomorrow? Mummy, can I have more?” You know, **it feels good**. **I’m not rich**. I can’t give them the world how I would like to. *But the little things* that matter [I can]...



# Odd Bedfellows

Grapes, *culantro*, stew beef, sugary drinks, ice cream, oyster sauce, sweetened yogurt, kids' cereal, rice noodles, snow peas, green boiling bananas, watermelon

# Cheap Calories?

Grapes, *culantro*, stew beef, sugary drinks, ice cream, oyster sauce, sweetened yogurt, kids' cereal, rice noodles, snow peas, green boiling bananas, watermelon



# Cheap Calories? *No*

Grapes, *culantro*, stew beef, sugary drinks, ice cream,  
oyster sauce, sweetened yogurt, kids' cereal, rice noodles,  
snow peas, green boiling bananas, watermelon



# Stress? Immediate Gratification?

Grapes, *culantro*, stew beef, sugary drinks, **ice cream**,  
oyster sauce, sweetened yogurt, kids' cereal, rice noodles,  
snow peas, green boiling bananas, watermelon



# Stress? Immediate Gratification? *No*

Grapes, *culantro*, **stew beef**, sugary drinks, **ice cream**,  
**oyster sauce**, sweetened yogurt, kids' cereal, **rice noodles**,  
snow peas, **green boiling bananas**, watermelon



# Advertising?

Grapes, *culantro*, stew beef, **sugary drinks**, ice cream,  
oyster sauce, sweetened yogurt, **kids' cereal**, rice noodles,  
snow peas, green boiling bananas, watermelon

# Advertising? *No*

Grapes, *culantro*, stew beef, **sugary drinks**, ice cream,  
oyster sauce, **sweetened yogurt**, **kids' cereal**, rice noodles,  
snow peas, green boiling bananas, watermelon



# Social Meaning—Yes

Grapes, *culantro*, stew beef, sugary drinks, ice cream, oyster sauce, sweetened yogurt, kids' cereal, rice noodles, snow peas, green boiling bananas, watermelon



# Social Meaning

- Emphasizes daughters' preferences
- Their preferences are *meaningful*
- They are meaningful in light of her economic situation
- Can grant food wishes even if other desires are unaffordable



# Questions

- For low-income parents, what social meaning and uses does food have?
- How do these social meanings and uses shape food choice?
- What are the nutritional implications of these choices?



# Findings

- Parents use food to buffer their children—and themselves—from the social and emotional pain of poverty
- Food is one of the most affordable ways to do so
- Parents are inclined to provide less healthy foods and to spend more than “necessary”

# Data and Methods



# Data Sources

- In-depth interviews
  - 84 primary caregivers (103 interviews)
    - Average: 2.25 hours
- Grocery-shopping observations plus post-shopping interview
  - 42 participants (46 observations)
    - Shopping Average: 1 hour
    - Interview Average: 1.25 hours

# Participant Recruitment

- Boston area, 2013-2016
- Organizations serving low-income families
- Flyers to contact more socioeconomically diverse families
  - Sent to households with children 4-8
  - Posted at libraries and businesses
- Referrals from interviewees, capped at 2



# Sample Characteristics

- 56% non-Hispanic white, 37% African-American, 7% biracial
- 56% low-income (<130% PIR), 13% moderate-income (130-350% PIR), 31% higher-income (>350% PIR)
- 3 grandmothers, 3 fathers

# Findings

# Desires in Common

- All parents want to make their children happy, show they care, and feel like competent caregivers

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- All parents want to make their children happy, show they care, and feel like competent caregivers
- Consumption is tightly intertwined with happiness and caring
- This is a facet of consumer society, and low-income parents are not immune to it (Pugh 2009)

# Less Money

- Poor parents have less money to accomplish these goals



# What I Can Do

Whatever I'm throwing on top of the yogurt would have to be fun. Like, I'd probably do the Fruity Pebbles, you know? Something colorful. [...] **I can't do extra things** as it is, so I try to throw in the little treats for them so they know:

***we get something, we get stuff, too.***

Rachelle  
low-income, African American



# What I Can Do

- Poor parents cannot regularly provide trips and outings, sneakers and gaming systems



# What I Can Do

- Poor parents cannot regularly provide trips and outings, sneakers and gaming systems
- Food is a readily accessible, reasonably affordable “little treat” parents can offer with relative frequency



# Fewer Resources, Different Meaning

- Poverty didn't just limit parents' *ability* to make kids happy through consumption

# Fewer Resources, Different Meaning

- Poverty shaped the very *meaning* of making children happy



# Happiness = Less Poor

It's been a **rough road**. But my kids get up and smile all the time. They're always **happy**. That's all that matters to me.

Rachelle  
low-income, African American

# Distance from Poverty

- Low-income parents use food to create distance from the emotional and social experience of poverty

# Distance from Poverty

- Low-income parents use food to create distance from the emotional and social experience of poverty
- This experience has multiple dimensions



# Buffering from Exclusion

I just make sure [to give her something]. I just **don't want her to feel left out**, period. I don't want to ever be somewhere where other people are havin stuff, and they don't have enough for my daughter, and then my daughter don't have nothin.

LaToya  
low-income, African American



# Feeling Normal

I don't want [my daughters] to look at the kids that can get certain things and be like, "Wish I was those kids." 'Cause that kind of stuff gets you as an adult. It's like bullying. You get bullied as a kid when you were younger, and you remember it.

Natasha  
low-income, biracial



# Feeling Normal

I don't want [my daughters] to look at the kids that can get certain things and be like, "Wish I was those kids." 'Cause that kind of stuff gets you as an adult. It's like bullying. You get bullied as a kid when you were younger, and you remember it.

Natasha  
low-income, biracial



# Feeling Normal

I want them to grow up and be like, 'Hey, I had a good childhood.' Regardless of what was going on. [...]  
Just regular children, you know?

Natasha  
low-income, biracial



# Buffering from Constraint

I never just leave him with not an option, 'cause that's my son, that's my baby. I don't want him to ever feel like he can't be comfortable in his own food.

Natalie  
low-income, African American

# Poverty's Social and Emotional Harms

- Degradation, Devaluation
- Smallness, Invisibility
- Difference
- Loneliness
- Unfairness
- Discomfort

# Food's Counterbalance

- Satisfaction
- Belonging, Dignity
- Normalcy
- Ease

# Emotional Dividends for Parents



# Care and Happiness

Well, it's to make sure they're happy. **I like** to see them happy. **I like to make** them happy. **I like** them to know that **I'm thinking about them** when I'm shopping. I'm thinking about what they like. **I want** to buy them stuff that they like to eat. It makes them happy. It **makes me happy** to know that they're happy.

Jacqui  
low-income, white



# Consumption as Care

- Low-income parents are like any parent: they want to make their children feel cared for and to feel caring in turn



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- Feeling caring paid emotional dividends to parents

# Consumption as Care

- Low-income parents are like any parent: they want to make their children feel cared for and to feel caring in turn
- Feeling caring paid emotional dividends to parents
- Food is a readily available, relatively affordable way to show care through consumption



# The Meaning of Care

- Poverty also shapes what it *means* to care:  
preserving a sense of competence that poverty takes away

# Preserving Competence

I give him junk. I give him sugar. He goes in the store and he sees a bag of Doritos, and he wants it; he sees juice and he wants it; he sees oatmeal cream pies, he wants them; he sees Starburst and M&M's and Butterfingers, and he *wants it all.*

Colleen  
low-income, white

# Preserving Competence

When my son wants something, I have a hard time saying “no” because we’re in this situation, and I feel like **it’s my fault** that I didn’t leave him better off. I feel like **I have something to make up for.**

Colleen  
low-income, white



# Buffering Selves from Poverty

- Narrow societal emphasis on achievement leaves low-income people feeling less competent, less valued, less accomplished, and more judged (Cobb and Sennett 1972)

# Buffering Selves from Poverty

- Making children happy → sense of accomplishment despite their material circumstances and low social status



# Buffering Selves from Poverty

- Mothers may feel doubly affected: they have failed to achieve for themselves, but also struggle to provide for their children



# Why Food?



# Why Food?: Traits of Food

- Fairly affordable, readily available, highly desired commodity
  - More affordable than other goods
  - Cheap enough to cover with pocket change or a small windfall



# Why Food?: Traits of Resources

- SNAP provides a (relatively) predictable way to satisfy needs



# Why Food?: Traits of Resources

We just got food stamps, so I want to get certain things that we won't have at the end of the month, so they don't feel deprived, ever. [...] So I'm bringing the stuff that's a little bit more expensive into the house at the beginning when I get [food stamps]. But they'll never feel like they want something and Momma doesn't have it.



# Why Food?: Traits of Resources

- SNAP leaves families “food rich”
- Trade-offs between indulgences and necessities are not immediately perceptible



# Just Pester Power?



# Consequences



# Inclined to Grant Kids' Wishes

They don't want me to give her juice, but I'm like, she's not just gonna be drinkin milk. She doesn't like to just drink water water water Yeah, I'm **not gonna treat my baby** like that. I'm not. **I can't do that.** Now, if y'all tell me for certain like "Oh, this is becomin a definite medical problem," then I got y'all. But if y'all are just assumin and guessin, I can't go off of that with **my baby. She's a kid.** She sees other kids with juice she's gonna want some. **That's not fair** to any kids.

LaToya  
low-income, African American



# Inclined to Grant Kids' Wishes

- Struggling parents cared about their children's health
- But they prioritized shielding children from children the social and emotional harms of poverty
- Worried that restriction was uncaring
- Result: inclination to provide the unhealthy foods children desired



# Inclined to Deny

When we visit my in-laws—the girls get so excited about it—they get to go [to the store] and get sweet cereal like Lucky Charms. Because, you know, otherwise we don't [eat that].

Ellen  
higher-income, white



# Budgetary Drain

[I had to give up] a lot of my vegetables. <uneasy laugh> I don't get fresh vegetables, I'll usually fill up the freezer with the frozen ones, cos I *need* to eat meat and a vegetable every night. Like, I *have* to, cos my [blood] sugars get low. I won't feel good. I'm not feeling good. So I've really been lacking in that. So yeah. <sighs>

Tracey  
low-income, white

# Budgetary Drain

I have to feed them first

# Budgetary Drain

They deserve it. But they deserve even more.

# Budgetary Drain

- Treats didn't just supplant similarly priced healthier food
- Some socially motivated purchases cost *more* than other (healthier) foods
  - Heat-and-serve chicken wings
  - Sushi
  - Lobster
  - Breakfast at IHOP
  - Panera soups
  - Juice and SSBs (vs. water)
  - Chips, candy, “junk”
  - Premade mashed potatoes (Simply Potatoes brand)
  - Freshly shaved deli pastrami
  - Jamaican patties



# Budgetary Drain

- On a limited budget, treats and splurges can displace money for other foods, including healthier foods
- In especially food-insecure households, they can lead to food insufficiency
- Yet for some parents, this sacrifice is worth it



# Budgetary Slack

- Higher-income families could have their kale and eat cake too



# Caveats and Scope Conditions

- The social uses and meaning of food weren't the only reason parents provided children's preferred foods
  - Time
  - Effort
  - Interpersonal friction
  - Behavior management
  - Waste avoidance

# Caveats and Scope Conditions

- Even within the “low-income” category, parents’ material and social conditions varied
- Some parents saw themselves on an upward trajectory
- They were less inclined to feel that poverty compromised their children’s wellbeing and their own



# Caveats and Scope Conditions

- No parent deemed it acceptable to give children whatever they wanted, whenever they wanted it
- Homecooked meals remained the ideal
- Treats and splurges were not seen as appropriate replacements for meals



# Caveats and Scope Conditions

- Some parents were ambivalent about making their children happy unhealthy food
- The most economically disadvantaged parents could only afford “junk” (not the more elaborate home-cooked meals their children also liked)
- They saw this fact as further evidence of their economic marginality

# Discussion and Conclusion

# Findings

- Low-income parents use food to satisfy children's consumer desires
- Low-income parents use food to create the **experience** of distance from poverty (Barthes 1961, Bourdieu 1984)
- Food sends a social "**message**" of love and care (Douglas)
  - Care means mitigating the emotional harm of having less
- Food bolsters parents' **identity** as competent and committed caregivers

# Argument

Unhealthy choices can be socially meaningful

# Argument

- Material scarcity and the low social status that attends it are a key source of food's social value and meaning

# Argument

- Granting children's food desires is not a cheap way to provide cheap calories
- It's an affordable way to satisfy children's desires

# Argument

- Granting children's desires for unhealthy food is not just a response to stress, limited cognitive bandwidth, or pester power
- Children's desires and the ability to satisfy them are meaningful
- Parents *want* to please their children (within reason)



# Argument

- Need to focus not just on structural and material constraints, but on social and symbolic *motivations*

# Policy and Programming

# Policy

- Be nice; don't judge

# Policy

- Low-income parents have not only structural and material *barriers* to providing healthy foods
- They also have social *incentives* to provide the unhealthy foods their children like
- But these social incentives remain rooted in parents structural and material circumstances

# Policy

- If families' economic conditions do not change significantly, unhealthy food may remain socially meaningful



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- Small increases in money for food may not lead families to buy healthier foods



# Policy

- If families' economic conditions do not change significantly, unhealthy food may remain socially meaningful
- Small increases in money for food may not lead families to buy healthier foods
- Small increases may actually lead to less healthy purchases :/



# Policy

- The material and social conditions that make food meaningful may need to change



# Policy

- Broad anti-poverty measures
  - Higher minimum wage
  - Universal basic income
  - Guaranteed housing
  - Universal childcare and early childhood education



# Policy

Sounds like wishful thinking...



# Symbolic Leverage Points

- Interventions should acknowledge the meaning of food and its place in social life

# Symbolic Leverage Points

- “Making the Healthy Choice the Easy Choice” has become a mantra in public-health interventions



# Symbolic Leverage Points

- “Making the Healthy Choice the Easy Choice” has become a mantra in public-health interventions

Change food environment → change health behaviors





# Symbolic Leverage Points

- In addition, let's “Make the Healthy Choice the *Meaningful* Choice”



# Symbolic Leverage Points

- In addition, let's "Make the Healthy Choice the *Meaningful* Choice"
- Diet change may involve a social and emotional loss



# Symbolic Leverage Points

- In addition, let's "Make the Healthy Choice the *Meaningful* Choice"
- Diet change may involve a social loss
- Interventions should offset this loss



# Symbolic Leverage Points

- Might be hard to convince parents that healthy food is a greater symbolic win than food that their kids enjoy
- Make healthy food meaningful to kids
  - Fun
  - Tasty
  - High-status

# Thank you

[cdaniel@berkeley.edu](mailto:cdaniel@berkeley.edu)

- Cultural sociology is concerned with the study of meaning. It acknowledges that the meaning of an object, such as food, will vary not just idiosyncratically but systematically
- There is a layer of interpretation between the object and the person perceiving it.
- In the example I give here, people see and use food in different ways depending on broadly shared ways of interpreting it and based on their (patterned) experience in the world

# Does Everyone Value Health?

- Many higher-income parents were “healthists” (Crawford 2006)—they saw health as an active project and some had high standards for what was healthy
- But the vast majority of low-income parents wanted their children to eat healthy food, too
- Many of them did not adhere to the same stringent standards as some higher-income parents, but they understood what is healthy
- Differences in definitions of health may account for why higher-income parents wanted their children to eat quinoa and superfoods, but it does not account for why poor parents would resist buying zucchini or brown rice

# Is Culture Epiphenomenal?

- I focused on how parents use food differently depending on their economic circumstances, but culture here isn't just epiphenomenal
- All parents subscribe to well institutionalized constructions of food as care; of intensive motherhood; of childhood as a protected age; and of health as a social value
- To the extent that culture stems from material conditions, it is because parents use food differently in light of their different economic circumstances to achieve widely held goals

# Generalizability

- These responses were prevalent in this sample
- I used a non-probability sample, so I cannot establish population-level prevalence
- Talking to people and observing them still has value because it can alert us to important mechanisms we wouldn't appreciate otherwise
- Once we identify these mechanisms, we can study their prevalence by surveying a representative sample

# Intergenerational Transmission

- Part of what I observe involves intergenerational transmission, and I shed light on how that mechanism actually works
- Food waste can deter parents from giving their child a new food. But what foods will go to waste depends on families' own tastes. Fewer foods will go to waste when family members eat that food too

# Intergenerational Transmission

- Families with broader palates can share small amounts of food or eat what the child leaves untouched.
- When parents have narrow tastes, a food that neither parent nor child likes may go to waste entirely
- This does look like intergenerational transmission

# Intergenerational Transmission

- BUT when parents with narrow palates want to offer a wider range of foods, they encounter the economic barrier of children's food waste and will continue buying the usual foods
- Here, what looks like intergenerational transmission is a combination of transmission and economic constraint

# Post-Hoc Rationalizations?

- Parents showed real emotional conflict about not being able to provide healthier foods
- Some of the treats they bought weren't the cheapest options possible or required effort to procure. It wasn't an empty default decision
- When kids tried something new and liked it, parents bought it, indicating that the cost of waste is a real barrier

# Health as Elitism? Maybe...

- Bourdieu, Crawford (2006), and Biltekoff (2013) would suggest that the emphasis on healthy eating is class elitism disguised as science, that we like and dislike foods because we associate them with categories that we esteem or hold in disregard
- It would be naïve to suggest that there is no hierarchy of foods
- It would be naïve to suggest that we don't associate "better" foods with higher-status groups

# Health as Elitism? But...

- There's a simultaneity problem: when lower-status groups do have lower-quality diets, it's hard to parse whether people are judging the people or the food
- Solution: survey experiment that 1) varies the characteristics of people and holds constant the quality of food and 2) varies the status of foods with similar nutritional profiles (e.g., Wonder Bread vs baguette)



# Goal

To understand how low-income people  
construct and experience food cost

# Constructions of Cost

- Some foods are too expensive
  - Foods take up too much of the budget and might edge something else out



# Constructions of Cost

- Seemingly straightforward judgments of affordability have other layers of interpretation
- When people say food is affordable or expensive, they consider parameters other than price
- Each parameter defines the set of foods that people deem affordable



# Constructions of Cost

## Key parameters:

- Practical concerns
  - Time
- Meaning of food (cultural schemas)
  - Conceptions of what is normal, plausible

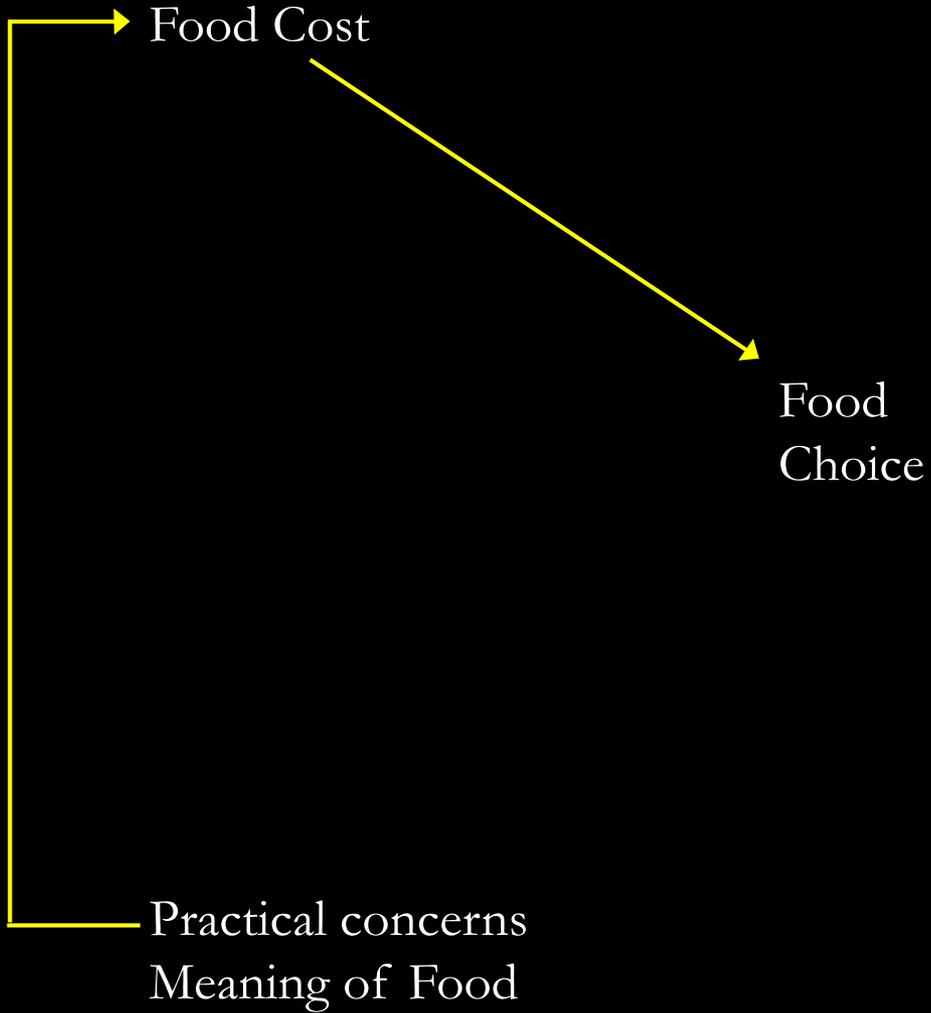


# Cultural Delimits Affordable Foods

- Carrots or peanuts for snack did not come to Chellise's mind
  - Carrots are dinner food, not snack food
- Sandwiches for dinner would not occur to Honor
  - Sandwiches are not “real” dinner
  - McDonald's is a “real” dinner: it is cooked, it is hot, and has multiple components, not slapped together with what's on hand



Meaning delimits options constrained by  
cost



- Symbolic purchases have economic consequences
  - For families on tight budgets, meaningful foods can deplete funds for needs later on



# Low-Income Families

- Meaningful foods reduce the food budget
  - Food stamps allot no money for sweets or treats
  - Some meaningful foods are pricier than the more mundane alternative



# Higher-Income Families

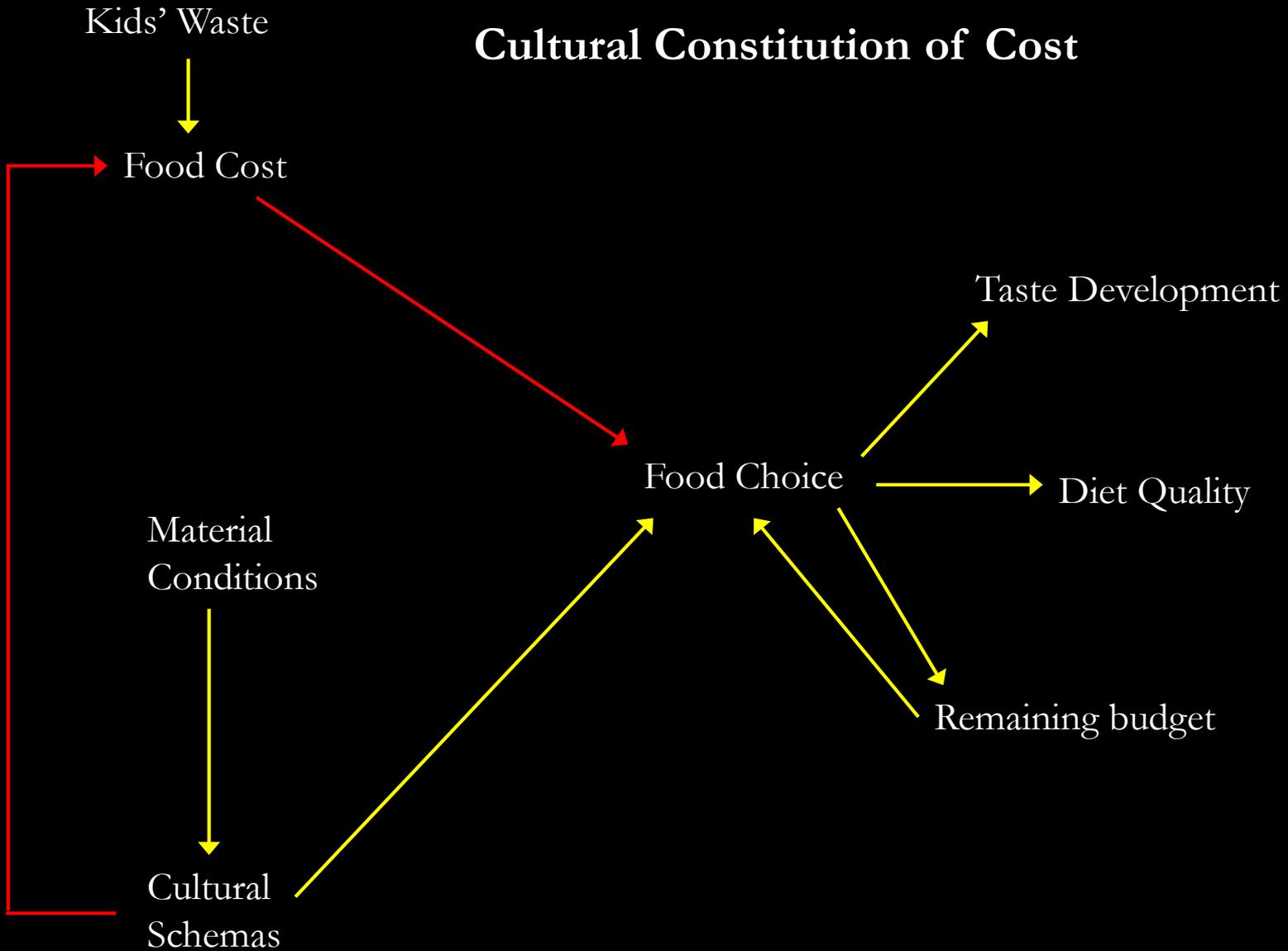
- Higher-income parents have funds for healthier foods and socially meaningful foods

# Consequences

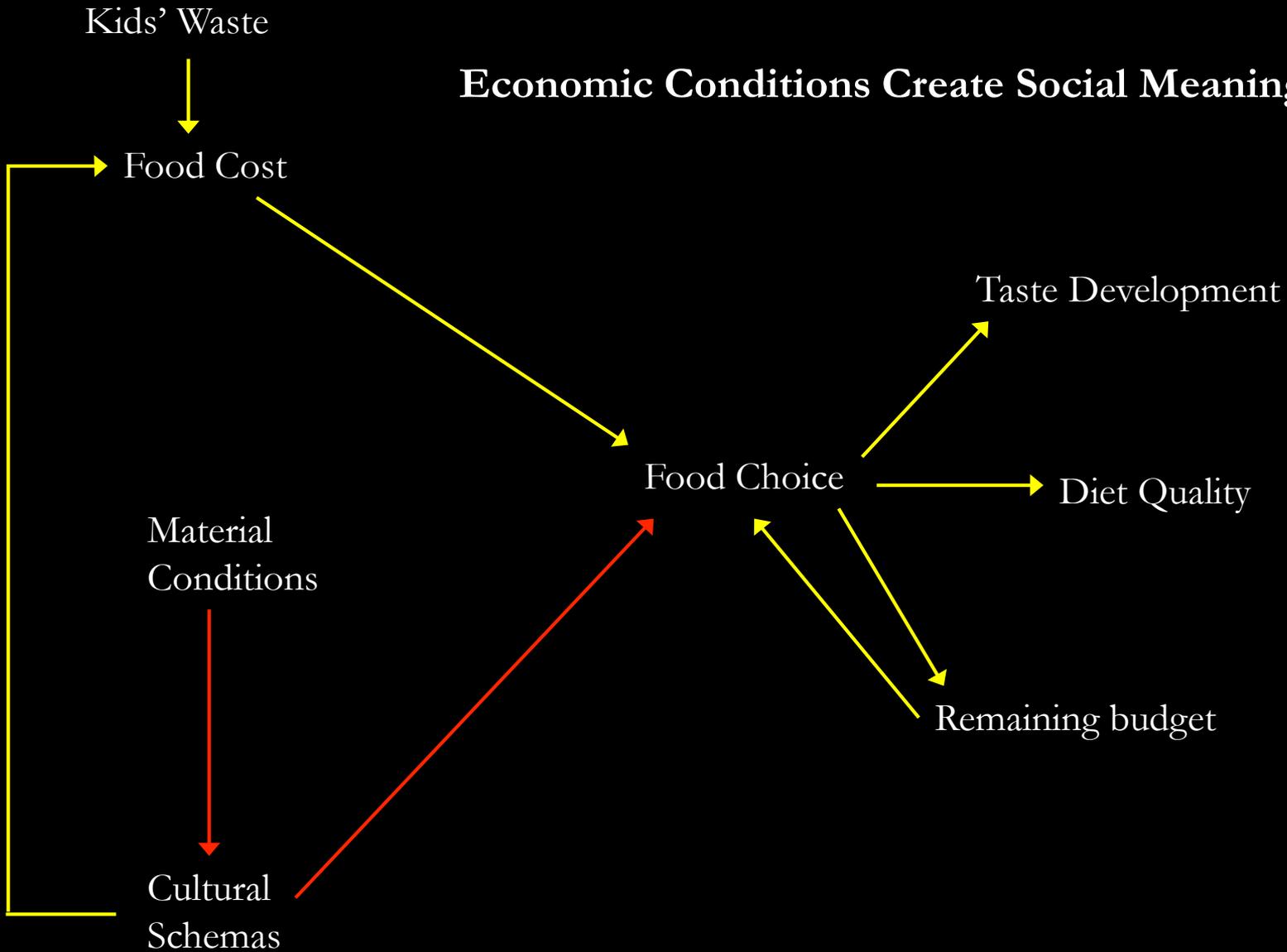
- For low-income parents, cost may become even more salient in subsequent purchases
  - Families may need to buy cheaper foods or less food



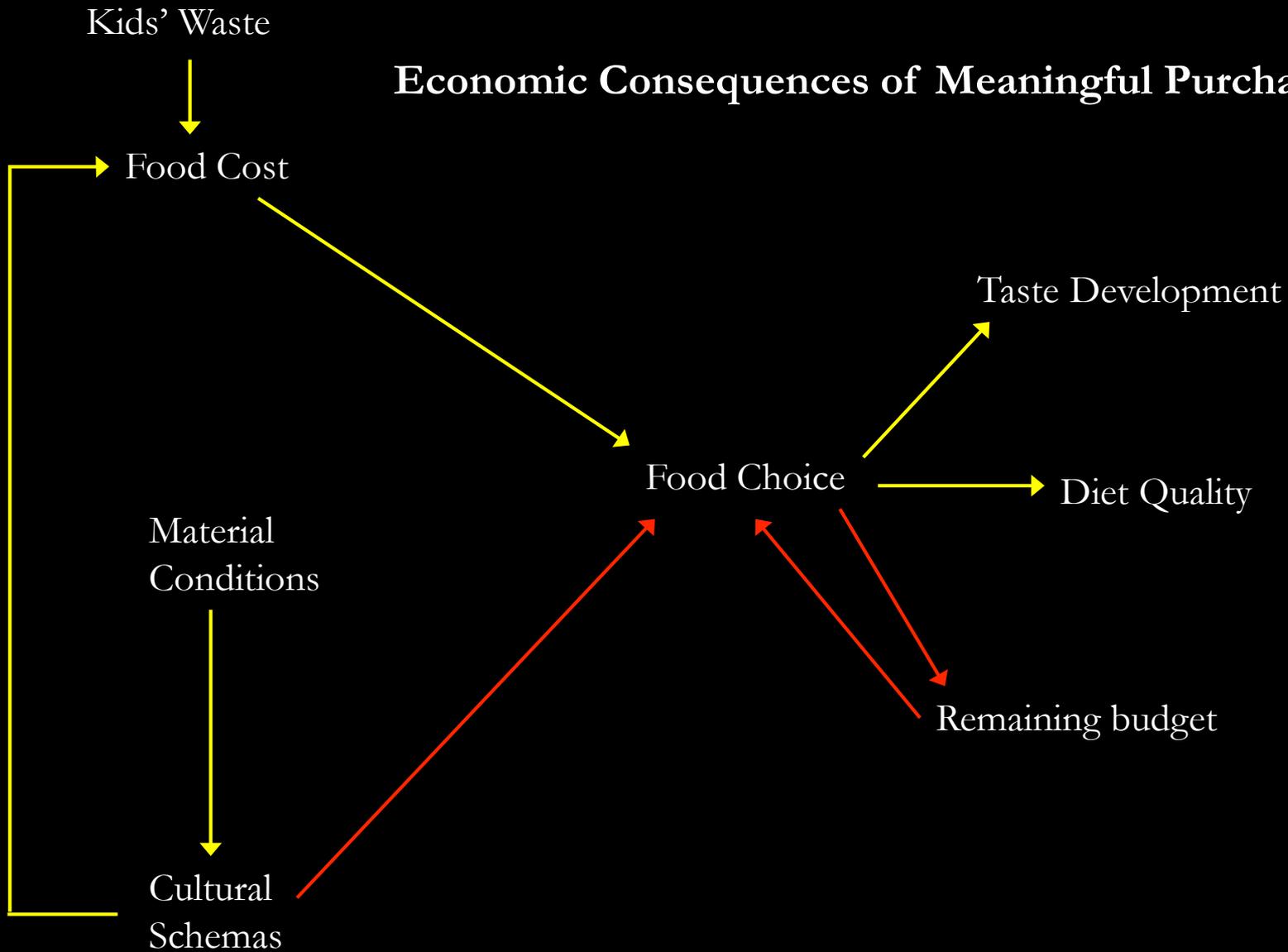
# Cultural Constitution of Cost



# Economic Conditions Create Social Meaning



## Economic Consequences of Meaningful Purchases





# Sample

	White	Black	Biracial	Total
Low-income (<130 PIR)	19	25	3	47
Med-income (130-350 PIR)	6	3	2	11
High-income (>350 PIR)	22	3	1	26
Total	47	31	6	84