Emerging Adult Breakfast Consumption Patterns as it Relates to Gender and Family Status.

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Introduction
As adolescents enter emerging adulthood, the eating patterns they experienced in childhood tend to become more self-directed. Moreover, college students typically have poorer eating habits compared to younger school-age children (Amen, 2007). These changes in behavior are important because eating patterns in emerging adulthood are linked to subsequent obesity in adulthood (Nelson et al., 2008).

Some common patterns in eating habits in emerging adulthood that are linked to subsequent health include eating breakfast, consuming few sugar sodas, and consuming produce. In this study, we focus on factors related to whether emerging adults show these more adaptive eating behaviors. College students are likely to skip breakfast. However, skipping breakfast is associated with less healthier food choices throughout the day such as eating higher calories and less nutritious meals (Goldstein et al., 2006).

Two factors linked to eating habits are gender and family histories. During adolescence, females may tend to skip breakfast more often than males due to concerns about being thin (Shaw, 1998). Specifically, male college students may report a lower intention to eat healthy (Deshpande, 2009). Furthermore, family health research has demonstrated that family marital status plays a role in the overall health of parents and their children, such intact families have fewer health risk factors (Guidubaldi & Cleminshaw, 1995).

Hypotheses
H1: Students from intact families will consistently eat breakfast over time compared to students from divorced families.
H2: There will be no significant difference in breakfast consumption patterns over time based on gender.
H3: Students from intact families will consume less sugar-sweetened beverages, but more produce over time compared to students from divorced families.
H4: There will be no significant difference in overall sugar-sweetened beverage and produce consumption based on gender.

Method
Participants
Four hundred and thirty eight college students participated in a five-day diary study. Students were recruited from psychology courses at SFSU (N = 438). Students who were within the age range of 18-29 comprised 94% of the sample (N = 411, M = 21.05, SD = 2.40).

The majority of the sample was female (73% or N = 405) – most likely due to the general distribution of psychology students at SFSU and in general. 61% of students (N = 405) were from intact families (parents have not separated, divorced, or remarried).

Measure
An online survey was completed gathering information on eating habits and daily functioning over a span of five days. The same survey questions were repeated for all five days, with the exception of days one and five which asked for demographic information and comments. Demographic questions gathered participant’s family history, age, gender, and contact information.

Procedure
The frequency of sugar-sweetened beverages such as soda, gatorade, etc. and produce (fruits & vegetables) was recorded. Among other questions that were asked, but not included in this analysis, were self-reported stress level, satisfaction with how students handled their problems for the day, and eating patterns throughout the day. We asked participants, “Did you eat breakfast today?” and they had two answer choices (“0 = no, I did not eat breakfast “and “1 = yes, I did eat breakfast”).

The family history question contained six different answer choices (“1 = married, never separated”, “2 = married, but separated at one point”, “3 = divorced or separated and not remarried”, “4 = divorced and remarried”, “5 = parents never married but lived together”, and “6 = parents never married and did not live together”) and was recoded into the dichotomous category of adult children of intact vs. divorced families. Answers 1, 2, and 5 were coded as intact and 3, 4, and 6 were coded as divorced.

Tables

Results
Univariate analysis of variance indicated a significant interaction in overall breakfast consumption based on family status and gender, F (3, 352) = 10.19, p < .002. This interaction highlights that males from divorced families skipped breakfast most frequently, but males from intact families consistently consumed breakfast overtime.

There was a significant interaction in overall produce consumption based on family status and gender, F (3, 348) = 5.68, p < .037. Students from intact families shared their produce consumption over time, however, males and females from divorced families showed greater variability.

There also was a significant interaction in overall soda consumption based on family status and gender, F (3, 353) = 5.66, p < .011. Young adults males from divorced homes consumed more sodas over the length of the study compared to males from intact families.

Discussion
Our findings demonstrate that family status and gender appear to play a role in eating behaviors such that male students of divorced families tend to skip breakfast the most. Although there were no main effects for produce and sugar-sweetened beverage consumption based on family status or gender, there were significant interactions.

Thus, gender moderated the link between a family history of divorce and eating habits of college students. However, there was a disproportionate amount of females in our sample which at times produced unequal variance. In conclusion, future efforts among school health programs, peers, and social groups should be aimed at reinforcing healthy eating behaviors throughout the college-age years.

References

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