



**Neighbourhood food stories: a secondary analysis
identifying nexus food practices
within a community facing financial constraints**

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With thanks to: Whitley Community Researchers and WCDA**



- **FoodSEqual** aimed to **co-produce food product and policy changes** which would reduce **food system inequalities**, working with people from low-income communities (see Wagstaff et al. (2015))
- This a secondary analysis; a **‘supplementary analysis’** (Clayton, 2012)
- We extend beyond product and policy innovation to tell **the story of people’s food practices & how these integrate across their lives.**
- We focus on one specific location, Whitley (Reading, UK)
- **We carried out a qualitative content analysis** (adapting Castelo et al. 2021) across summarised data from: 2 sets of interviews (n=89), 3 questionnaires (n=204), 10+ workshops (n=98), and feedback on findings (n=32). We held **iterative dialogue** with locally embedded actors during analysis, and integrated quantitative results.
- **We also report participants own proposals for change**
- **All coauthors were involved in original data collection** which involved community researchers

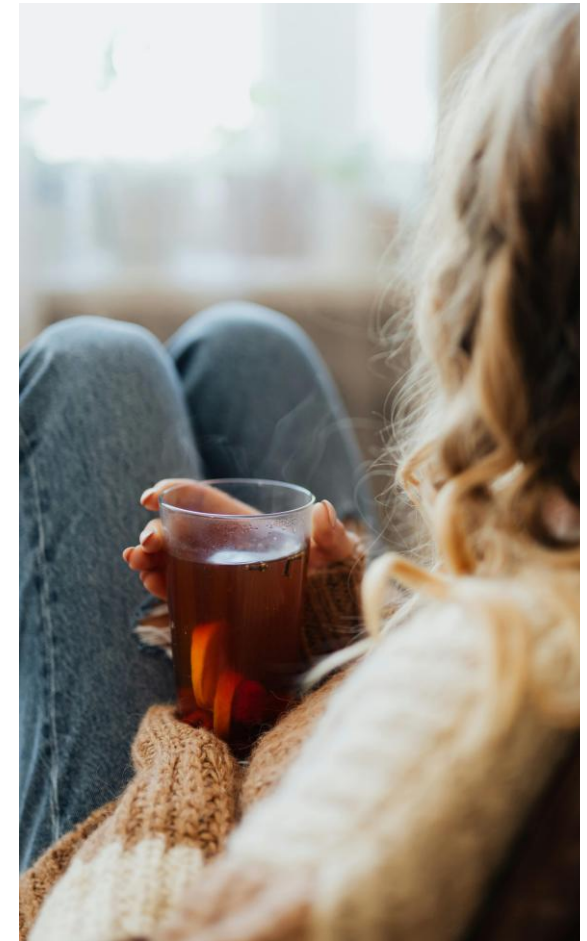
What are practices?

Routinised everyday behaviours: e.g. making a cup of tea

They are comprised of: **material, competencies and meaning**

(Shove et al., 2012)

- material (what): tea, kettle, boiling water, electricity etc...
- competencies (how): knowing how to make a cup of tea, knowing how to use the kettle etc...
- meaning (why): a hot drink as comforting, a cup of tea as a break etc....



Practices overlap and form complex networks with connections that can compete or collaborate.

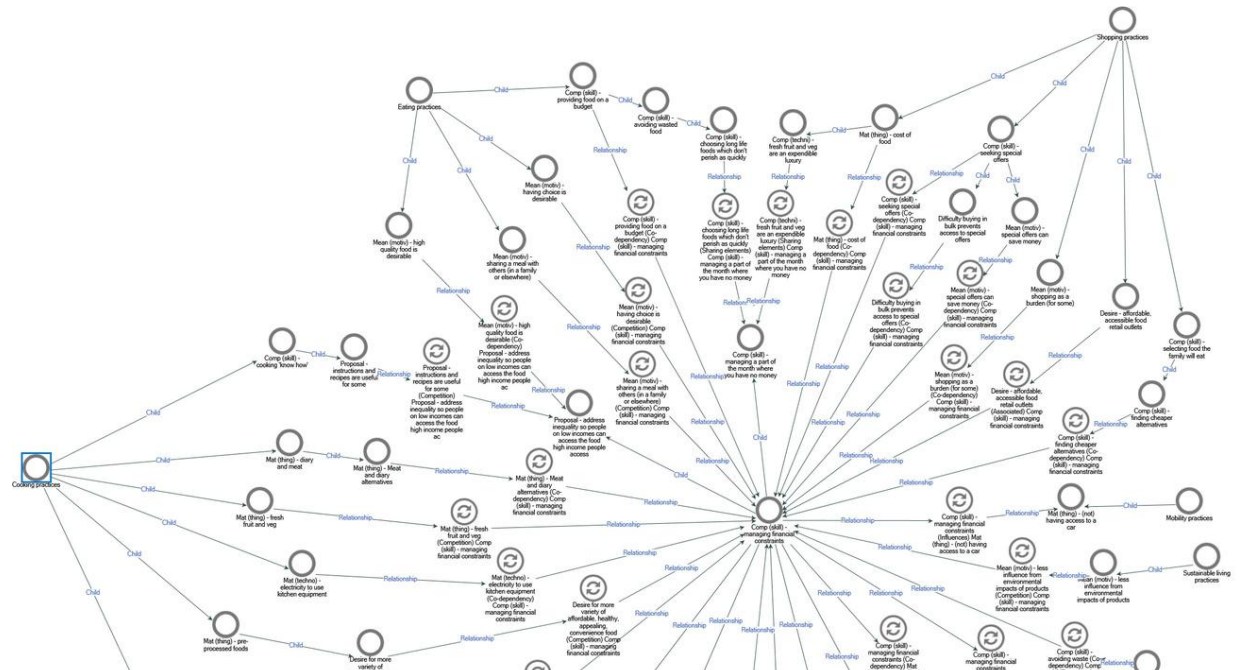
Nexus practices are ones which are highly connected

(Castelo et al., 2021)



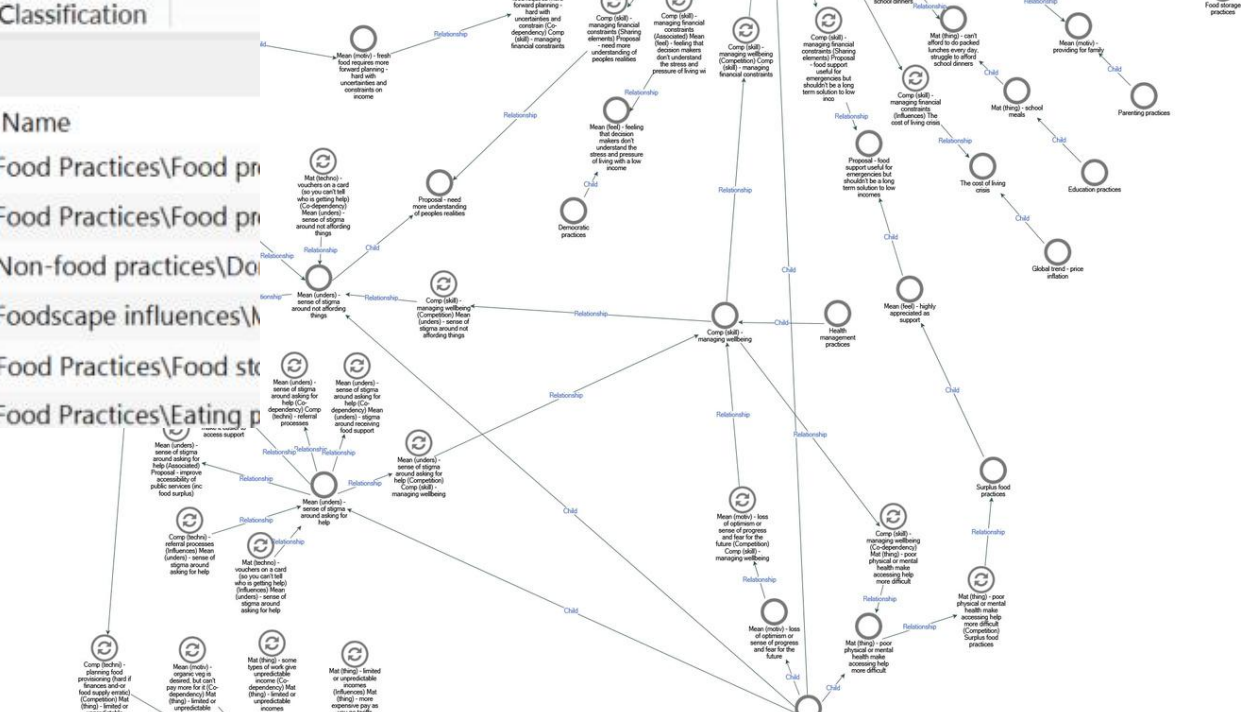
Codes

Name	Files
1. Food Practices	0
Agricultural practices	0
Cooking practices	4
Comp (know) - managing food safety	1
Comp (skill) - cooking 'know how'	3
Comp (skill) - managing portion control	2
Comp (skill) - managing portions and leftovers t	1
Comp (skill) providing food quickly	2



Relationships

From Name	From F	Type	To Name
1. Food Practices\Agricultural practices	Codes	Co-dependency	1. Food Practices\Food p
1. Food Practices\Agricultural practices	Codes	Sharing elements	1. Food Practices\Food p
1. Food Practices\Cooking practices	Codes	Co-dependency	2. Non-food practices\Do
1. Food Practices\Cooking practices\Comp (know) - managi	Codes	Influences	3. Foodscape influences\M
1. Food Practices\Cooking practices\Comp (know) - managi	Codes	Co-dependency	1. Food Practices\Food st
1. Food Practices\Cooking practices\Comp (know) - managi	Codes	Co-dependency	1. Food Practices\Eating p



Nexus practices identified in the Whitley data

Practices with the most connections [Plus accessibility from feedback discussions]

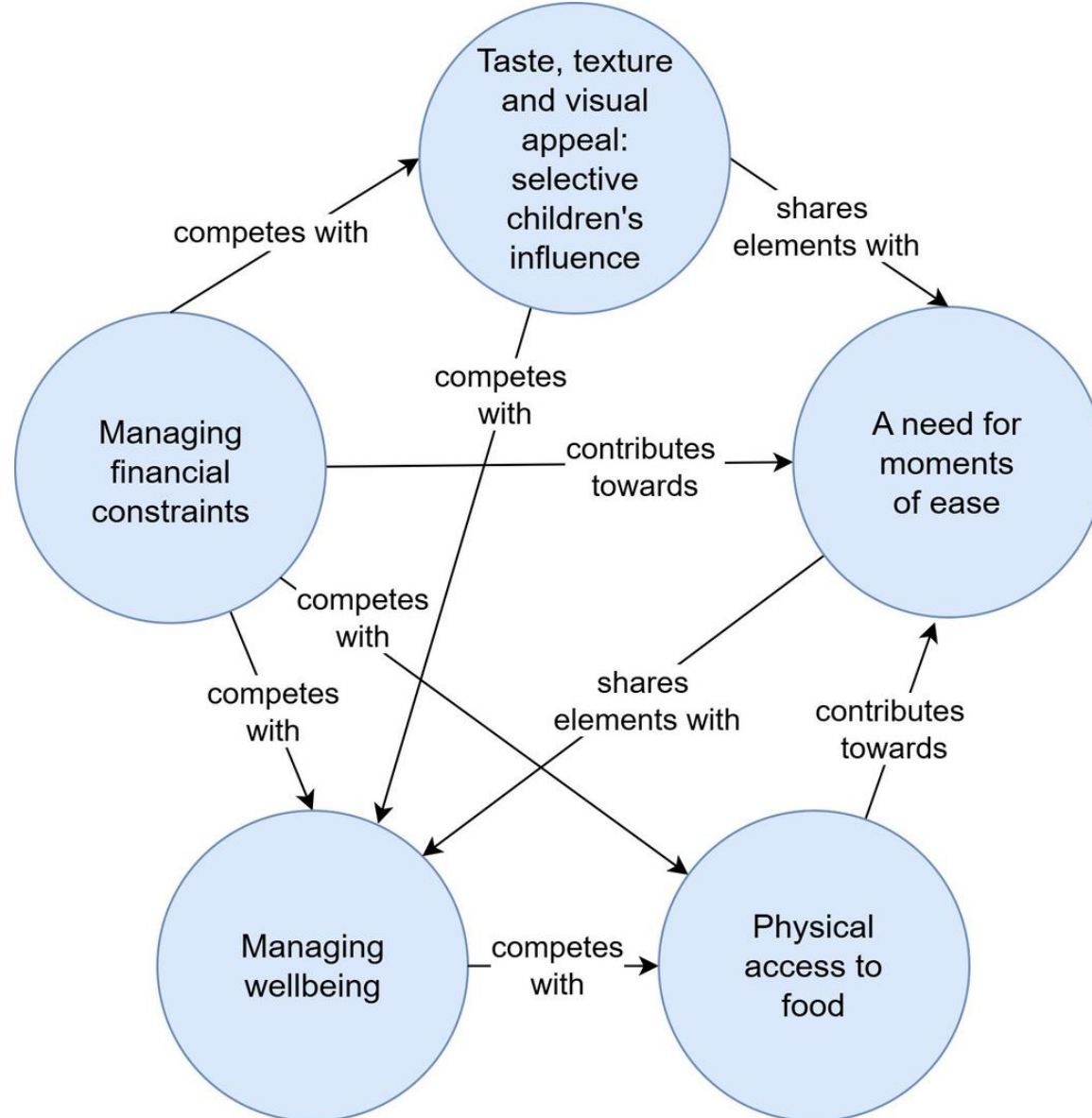
Parent node	practice	connection
Money management practices	Comp (skill) - managing financial constraints	25
Cooking practices	Mean (motiv) - need for moments of ease (little time, lots of stress, need convenience)	21
Mean (motiv) - taste, texture and visual appeal	Mat (thing) - 'selective' children (a strong influence on household choices)	17
Eating practices	Mean (motiv) - food as a source of health	16
Eating practices	Mat (thing) - allergies or dietary restrictions	13
Health management practices	Comp (skill) - managing wellbeing	13
Eating practices	Mean (motiv) - having choice is desirable	12
Eating practices	Mean (motiv) - taste, texture and visual appeal	12
Mat (thing) - cost of food	Mean (motiv) - cost effectiveness a big influence on choice	12
Mat (thing) - home cooked food	Mean (motiv) - home cooked food is good, healthy food	10
Cooking practices	Mat (thing) - pre-processed foods	10
Eating practices	Mean (motiv) - food as a source of comfort and pleasure	10
Mean (motiv) - food as a source of health	Mean (unders) - additives and chemicals are unhealthy	10
Eating practices	Mean (motiv) - high quality food is desirable	10
Eating practices	Mean (motiv) - sharing a meal with others (in a family or elsewhere)	10

Nexus practices identified in the Whitley data

Practices with the most competitive connections

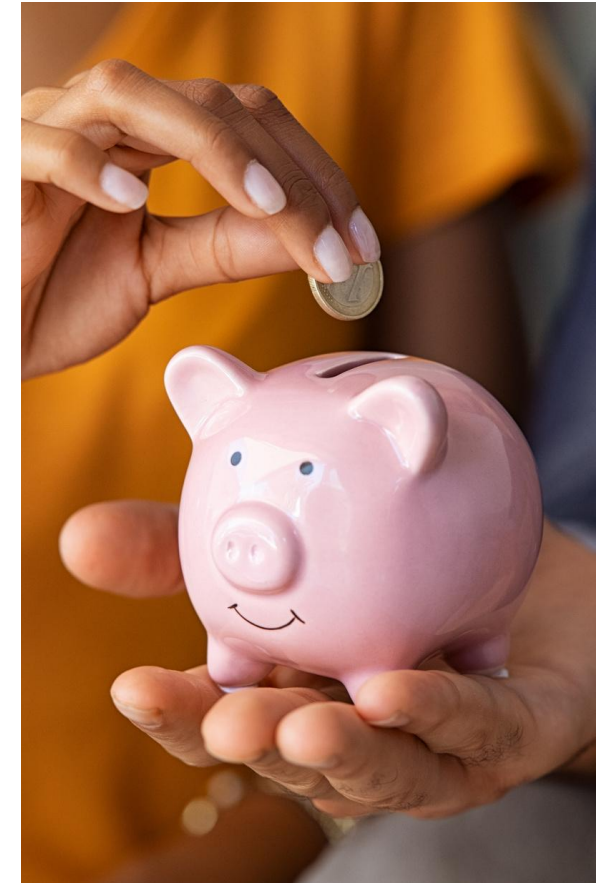
Parent node	practice	connections
Health management practices	Comp (skill) - managing wellbeing	7
Eating practices	Mat (thing) - allergies or dietary restrictions	6
Eating practices	Mean (motiv) - food as a source of health	6
Shopping practices	Mat (thing) - cost of food	6
Money management practices	Comp (skill) - managing financial constraints	6
Comp (know) - managing food safety	Comp (techni) - discarding based on sell by date or for looking	4
Mat (thing) - fresh fruit and veg	Mean (unders) - fresh fruit and veg are healthy, desirable and eaten	4
Mat (thing) - home cooked food	Mat (thing) - extra or special ingredients to add to recipes or improvise	4
Eating practices	Mean (motiv) - food as a source of comfort and pleasure	4
Mean (motiv) - taste, texture and visual appeal	Mat (thing) - 'selective' children (a strong influence on household choices)	4

Nexus practices identified in the Whitley data



Broadly connected financial constraints, acting upstream and sideways

- **Managing limited or unpredictable incomes;** in the context of ongoing global economic instability and increasing wealth inequality
- **Influencing practice bundles across multiple areas connected to food practices** including: management of health, wellbeing and stress; parenting and leisure; mobility and shopping; cooking and food waste management
- **Direct impacts on food practices** include: avoiding food waste by choosing longlife foods and avoiding experimenting with new foods (in case the family reject them), filling up on cheaper calories, barriers to cooking (ingredients, equipment, energy), limits on provision of family leisure and cohesion activities and treats
- **‘Upstream’ and ‘sideways’ approaches need to tackle the root causes** and structural factors affecting financial constraints, such as:
 - improving working conditions, wages and routes to work see also Power et al., (2021)
 - further regulating food and energy prices/tariffs or property maintenance
 - free bus passes or leisure activities for children see also Isaacs et al., (2022)
- **Other approaches:** increase targeted cash or voucher assistance for healthy food, schools to provide cost saving initiatives such as passing on uniforms



“People assumed that if you didn’t eat well, it’s because you didn’t have the education or didn’t know how or didn’t want to, but that’s just not true.”

Market interventions for food and packaging waste

- Two main challenges (connected to financial constraints):
 - **surplus food supplies** are **inconsistent** and **often close to perishing**
 - **not affording food waste**: reduces purchases of perishable food and experimentation with new foods
- Participant proposals included **reducing perishable items being sold in larger bags** and **making smaller or flexible portions affordable**
 - Reducing plastic packaging was also desirable for environment and health
- **Improvements in surplus food distribution** through the 'hybrid food supply chain' were also requested (Sawyer et al., 2023)
 - Better coordination around use by dates
 - Processing perishing foods into valuable ready meals
- **Community tasting sessions** are also a popular proposal (de-risking experimentation with new foods)



Targeting interventions for accessibility across the life course and in place

- **Accessibility is particular challenge for people with specific circumstances** including having small children, short or long-term health conditions, financial constraints (and related challenges), and lacking access to a car
- **Shopping can feel like a burden**
- ... **can require extra time due to multiple reasons:** making multiple trips, difficulty forward planning, not having a car to carry shopping home and using multiple shops to get products or prices required.
 - (Many relate to financial constraints)
- **Life circumstances influence accessibility**, so analysis of how constraints and opportunities shift across life courses could inform intervention design
(Lundberg, 2020)
- **Socioeconomic and place-based inequalities** also need to be considered as they impact on food access. For example, some places are 'food deserts'.
(Smith and Thompson, 2022, ch.2)



Moments of ease across the food environment, lifestyles and society

- **Convenience foods are consumed across all income brackets.** The context is societal-wide shifts in social expectations, technology and industry. For example, changed working practices have reducing time and flexibility for food provisioning. (Johnson and Hendry, 2019)
- However, **low incomes produce inequalities of ease**; like not being able to ‘buy in’ time saving (e.g. pay a cleaner), lacking access to appropriate cooking equipment. (Van Rosperen and Evans, 2025)
- **Higher cost convenience food is *sometimes* more healthy** – FoodSEqual aimed to address this which could be useful. Although other influences on food practices might not be addressed by this, such as the influence of selective children.
- **Need to address inequalities but not perpetuate stereotypes.** Some challenges need addressing across society with regulatory responses.
- Also consider **the societal expectations developed alongside convenience foods**, and **structural inequalities** constraining people’s possibilities to act.
- **A need for moments of ease** is an alternative conception to **convenience**



“someone else cooks for you. All the kids are happy and don’t complain. You don’t have to wash up.”

Broader approaches to managing health and wellbeing

- **Participants understand and care about health and eating good food.** They have concerns about unhealthy chemicals and additives, as well as salt and sugar
- **Health is a higher priority than environmental considerations for adults,** but faces competition from food costs alongside taste, texture and family acceptability.
- **Managing health and wellbeing is broader than healthy eating.** It also includes entertainment, social connection, treats and rests – takeaways and eating out were liked for providing these things. **Moments of ease are part of managing wellbeing.** (Isaacs et al., 2022)
- **Complex relationships with financial constraints include** finance-related stress and anxiety, experiencing cold, and exhaustion from working longer hours.
- **Wellbeing is also affected by various types of stigma:** around not affording things, seeking support, and being patronized you don't understand eating healthily
- **Interventions need to situate healthy eating as part of broader wellbeing needs -** how can these be met in people's life circumstances and contexts? (McCarney et al., 2019)
- Participants also wanted more support for community hubs which offer face-to-face support and services.



“There is a psychological connection ... I’m having a treat and I deserve it.”

Engaging children, the whole family and community in diet change

- **Multiple reasons why children might be selective eaters**, from intolerance or neurodiversity to familiarity. Children refusing food has a long history.
- **Parents care about providing for their families**, including health and energy. They want to ensure children are fed but also maintain their own wellbeing and family harmony. This often included **cooking multiple meals** for different preferences.
- **Providing for families extends to other wellbeing needs** such as treats, rest, entertainment, and social cohesion activities (financial constraints influence)
- **Parents were often reluctant to experiment with new foods** as they can't afford food not being eaten. A few adult participants also did not enjoy many varieties of fruits and vegetables. ...changing palates over generations?
(Dawson, 2016)
- Participants wanted **fun activities to increase child familiarity** with foods and to **de-risk experimentation** with new foods for parents. Ideally **run with schools** or in **community settings**. **Regulatory responses to advertising were also desired.**
- They suggested **this includes the whole family, and even community**. Our findings show food practices as entangled across work, school, family and more. Indicating the **utility of place-based approaches**; co-designed with participants



“when we were younger our parents said eat it or starve, so we are less picky. I don’t do that to my kids.”

Addressing normative inequality and increasing public participation

- **Normative inequality** relates to judgement about what is appropriate, with some practices judged as 'morally superior'. It is part of **inexperiences of equality**.
(Hollie et al., 2021)
- Examples across our findings include **people feeling judged for not eating 5-a-day when their circumstances constrain them** from doing this, or feeling a sense of stigma from receiving food-related or other support.
- This is **likely linked to broader stigma** and negative public narratives around having a low income - which are **part of how inequality is justified** and perpetuated - and **can influence policy making and public interventions**.
(Sutton et al., 2014; Tyler and Campbell, 2024)
(Cairney, 2019, pp.6–7; van Kesteren and Evans, 2025)
- **Decisionmakers (industry/politicians) not understanding the realities of people's lives** came up multiple times. Given long-term financial hardship and stress some participants had lost optimism about the future, some distrust decision makers.
- **Meaningful involvement in decisionmaking** can build understanding, trust and disrupt bias.
(Gibbs and Mutebi, 2026)
- **Need to actively avoid language** which negatively frames groups or perpetuates stereotypes, and **challenge/address the assumptions underlying it**.
(Fielding-Singh and Oleschuk, 2023; Aphramor, 2024; Tyler and Campbell, 2024)



“5-a-day makes you feel really incompetent.”

“Come and live for a week in my shoes.”

Conclusion

- Transforming food inequalities requires transdisciplinary efforts **that must reach beyond food**
- There is a need to **address the root causes of financial constraints**, and consider how to support people to **meet broader wellbeing needs**; including **the need for moments of ease**.
- **Shifting the focus from ‘health behaviours’ to ‘health practices’** transcends the dichotomy of structural inequalities and context versus individual agency. Supporting identification of diverse interventions to transform food environments, inequalities and diets. (Mattioni et al., 2020; Wright-Pedersen et al., 2026)
- Systems approaches *can* integrate diverse approaches across levels; but need attention to where system boundaries are drawn and integration of equity perspectives. (Campbell et al., 2025)
- Experiences and impacts of stigma were evident; policies and interventions risk perpetuating this unless bias and assumptions about low incomes are acknowledged and addressed.

***We welcome thoughts, feedback or
discussion***

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