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Starting with a Clean Plate: Re-envisioning the Dietary Guidelines through an Ethnographic  
Review of Domestic Cooking Practices

-- ABSTRACT --

According to the latest estimate from USDA researchers, only 3% of Americans adhere to the government's dietary guidelines which are intended to serve as the population benchmark for choosing a healthful diet.<sup>1,2</sup> In response, this ethnographic study explores the current situation with the aim of identifying ways by which to improve dietary health through nutritional education. In the first stage of this project I seek to understand how individuals conceptualize and express understandings of health through the context of their home-cooking practices. In the second stage, I explore barriers within the nutritional didactic model that affect how the USDA's Dietary Guidelines for Americans are disseminated, received, and utilized. Data for this project has been gleaned from ethnographic video footage of home-cooks throughout Northeastern New England, participant-observation in a nutritional cooking class in Vermont, and interviews with home-cooks and nutritional educators. This data, in the form of fieldnotes and transcripts, has been coded and analyzed and then more broadly triangulated. Through this study I have found that healthy eating and dietary adherence are complex behaviors, extending well-beyond the realm of food groups, that require a mindful negotiation of options, choices, and competing priorities. The results of this study suggest that future dietary adherence improvement strategies may benefit from understanding and addressing adherence as an involved process rather than an isolated pass/fail effort. One possible area of intervention could focus on the role of nutrition educators, and specifically the adaptive roles they can serve in helping their clients navigate a path towards improved dietary adherence, and ultimately improved health.

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<sup>1</sup> Palmer, Sharon. "Get Ready for the 2010 Dietary Guidelines." *Today's Dietitian*, December 2009, 20.

<sup>2</sup> U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) and U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. *Dietary Guidelines for Americans, 2010*. 7<sup>th</sup> Edition, Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, December 2010.