The foundation for understanding food-related behavior and its determinants rests on the definition and measurement of behavior. Food-related behavior has been defined and measured in a variety of ways. Each definition and its concomitant measurement possesses different assumptions, potential strengths, and inherent weaknesses. In the following sections, various approaches for defining and measuring food-related behavior are discussed. We will present a framework for organizing and comparing these approaches and will examine various criteria for evaluating the quality of the measurements of food-related behavior.

**Defining Food-Related Behavior**

One simple approach is to define food-related behavior as what people do; that is, people's actions toward food. This simple definition, however, aggregates (and treats as the same) a wide variety of actions toward food. People can consume food, sell food, buy food, throw food, use food as a weapon (as in poison food), and perform a host of other actions toward foods. Four behaviors--choice, purchase, consumption, and nutrient intake--will be examined here because each has been used as the criterion variable by researchers studying food-related behavior.

These four behaviors may be viewed as a set of sequential steps that people perform to maintain or enhance their well-being. People start by making a choice among food products, then making a purchase, and then consuming the food, which results in nutrient
intake. Each step is connected to, but not determined solely by, the previous step. Nutrient intake cannot occur without consumption, except in cases like a program of parenteral infusion during a postoperative period. Consumption is connected to, but not determined solely by, purchase because of factors like food waste and food preparation methods. Purchase is connected to, but not determined solely by, choice because of factors like availability.

These behaviors need to be differentiated for two reasons. First, if these behaviors are caused by unique, independent factors that are the necessary and sufficient determinants, then these behaviors are themselves unique. Two unique, necessary and sufficient causes cannot lead to the same behavior. Second, these behaviors take on different meanings to researchers. For example, epidemiologists may view nutrient intake as the important aspect of food-related behavior, whereas marketers may view purchase as the important aspect of behavior.

Choice Behavior. Choice behavior reflects an individual's decision to purchase or consume a food. This behavior is the individual's intention to perform the behavior, where intention is a belief that links the person with some action (such as purchasing or consuming a specific food product).

Choice differs from purchase and consumption behavior in that a person's decision about a food does not necessarily determine purchase or consumption behavior; that is, the determinants of purchase and consumption behavior are not the same as the determinants of choice behavior. In some cases, a person's choice may be determined by his or her attitude toward the product. Suppose that a person decides to purchase oranges based on his or her attitude and goes to the store to implement this decision. At the store, the person discovers that oranges are not available or is exposed to information from point-of-purchase displays. Both these new events may change the original food choice, suggesting that choice and purchase assess different constructs.