

The psychology of food choice: some old and new approaches

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Food choice is a highly interactive and dynamic behaviour, involving perception, motivation and memory. It is certainly one of the most important behaviours in life and although seemingly simple, it is the resultant of rather complicated interactions between physiological (neuro-physiological and metabolic), psychological (implicit and explicit), sociological, cultural and economical factors. Understanding (or even better predicting) why a given person or group of persons will want to eat a certain product at a certain time, seems an almost insurmountable problem as long as there is no integrative model linking all these interrelated factors. Such a model should be based on research that allows insight in the interaction of at least a few of these factors and that, in order to capture the dynamic nature of the underlying processes, follows the development of these interactions over time. Such research is still rare, partly because it demands an interdisciplinary approach and partly because including development over time has serious consequences in terms of effort and cost. Lack of adequate and readily available statistical and mathematical methods to describe and validate such dynamic processes may be a third reason for the slow development of this research.

These problems are illustrated with recent research on the dynamics of preference, on the relative roles of memory and perception in food preference and on the way in which situational factors influence food choice.

With regard to the first topic, several experiments are discussed that show that single hedonic measurements are very poor predictors of later liking and preference and the hypothesis is forwarded that choosing a food enhances the chance that the next time another food will be chosen. These changes are dependent both on intrinsic properties of the food and on the level of arousal that it provokes in the subject in a given situation. The results of the experiments are discussed in the light of physiological and psychological theories on behavioral change, preference development and aesthetics. Seen from these theories, changes in preference are not just erratic happenings, but are subject to certain rules that govern the development in the direction of the appreciation of more sophisticated objects (foods ?). Methods for early trend recognition and for the prediction and verification of changes are needed in this connection.

The second topic stresses the point that the role of memory in food and consumer science has been neglected. It is not only what people perceive, but also what they remember of their often unconscious perceptions that determines future food choices. Incidental learning and implicit memories play an important role in the development of expectations about food and in food choice. The very explicit methods used in sensory science and consumer research are often insufficient to reveal these hidden determinants of food-related decision making. In many cases, such methods are even down-right misleading. Here, much more indirect methods of research are needed.

The third topic discusses the role of intentionality and of the internal state of the subject in food choice behaviour. Situations are seen as eating and drinking occasions which are created by the intentions and the motivational state of the individual and which are not just context factors that are independent of the perceiver. That hunger and thirst influence the perception of food and drink is readily accepted by everyone, but it should also be realised that many

other, often hidden and very personal factors determine the choice between foods. In such decisions, the personal history (both implicit and explicit, physiological and psychological) of the person reflects itself in the relative attractiveness of the foods presented. Situational analysis tries to cope with these hidden wishes of the consumer in a matter of fact way. Here, methods for the analysis of the commonalities in these highly idiosyncratic situations are needed.

In conclusion, there is a great need of a more interdisciplinary research, using new and more refined methods, that rely less on perception alone, to uncover the true motivational factors that determine the choice of foods in the seemingly simple eating and drinking behaviour of the omnivorous creatures that humans are.