

Political correctness could affect holiday weight gain

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It's that time of year when Americans start focusing on holiday celebrations, many of which will involve high-calorie food. As the festivities proceed, so do countless tips for keeping off extra weight this season.

But, there is one factor most people likely won't consider—political correctness.

Research from Duke University's Fuqua School of Business suggests you could be choosing unhealthy options to serve your guests because you don't want to offend someone else.

Marketing doctoral student Peggy Liu and Fuqua marketing professor Gavan Fitzsimons led a team that conducted multiple experiments into

how people choose between healthy and unhealthy food options when they are picking for both themselves and another person.

"We wanted to understand if food choices would change if they were picking a dish or snack for themselves and an average-sized person versus themselves and an overweight person," Liu said.

Their findings, "Matching Choices to Avoid Offending Stigmatized Group Members," are published in the November 2013 issue of the journal *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*.

In one of the studies, participants were asked to choose a snack option of either wheat crackers or chocolate chip cookies for themselves and a person they had just met. In some cases, the recently introduced woman appeared as her normal size (wearing a size 0-2). In other situations, the woman was wearing a body suit that appeared to increase her weight by nearly 65 pounds (making her closer to a size 16).

Researchers discovered most participants (almost 60 percent) would choose the same snack for themselves and the woman when she appeared overweight. When the woman appeared her normal size, participants only choose the same snack about 30 percent of the time. When picking for themselves and the [overweight women](#), participants didn't overwhelmingly choose one particular snack over the other (about 30 percent chose cookies and about 30 percent selected wheat crackers).

"What the results show is that people pick the same snack to avoid offending someone they perceive as overweight. This means that people might pick unhealthier options for themselves and others during the holidays if they think not doing so could hurt someone's feelings," Fitzsimons said.

In similar, additional studies, participants told researchers they thought it

would be offensive either to give an overweight person healthy food and then take unhealthy food for themselves or, conversely, to give an [overweight person unhealthy food](#) and then take healthy food for themselves.

"This suggests that if you are heading back to the buffet to cut a piece of pumpkin pie for your overweight uncle, you might also cut a larger piece than normal for yourself, so you don't hurt his feelings," Liu said.

The research has implications beyond the buffet line.

"As marketers increasingly recognize that the shopper is often not the consumer of products and we often make product choices for others in our lives, firms need to better factor in a consumers' desire to match consumption within the household to avoid offense," Fitzsimons said.

"Counter to common marketing wisdom, a single product that adequately meets the needs of multiple family members without offending any may dominate individual items that perfectly meet the needs of each family member but raise the risk of offense," Liu said.

Marketing doctoral student Troy Campbell and management professor Grainne Fitzsimons were also part of the research team.

More information: www.sciencedirect.com/science/.../S0749597813000824

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