

Lasting impressions: Psychologists discover what influences our food choices

January 29 2016

As New Year's resolutions come and go, one area many people focus on is their health and weight. With Americans tipping the scales more than ever, social and personality psychologists are at the forefront of understanding the psychological motivations for healthy food choices and consumption patterns.

First impressions of food: Growing up poor's long-term impact on eating patterns

Studying the psychology of [food](#) choice, Texas Christian University's Dr. Sarah Hill's research revealed that childhood [socioeconomic status](#) may influence people's [food choices](#) as adults. "Our research finds that growing up poor promotes eating in the absence of hunger in adulthood, regardless of one's adult socioeconomic status."

According to their findings, this means that a person's developmental history may play a key role in their relationship with food and weight management, rendering those from lower socioeconomic status (SES) environments more vulnerable to unhealthy weight gain.

In a collection of three studies, each with 31 women, Hill measured or manipulated participants' energy needs and gave them the opportunity to eat provided snacks. The participants also reported their childhood and adult SES. Results revealed that people with higher childhood SES ate more when need was high than when need was low. This relationship was

not observed among those with lower childhood SES. These individuals consumed comparably high amounts of food whether their current energy need was high or low.

Hill and her team recognize that they are researching one component of a complex set of factors influencing obesity and weight management. Current research is underway to examine the mechanisms that promote the association between low childhood SES and eating in the absence of hunger.

"Healthy" food: Serving order and labels influence healthy eating

When it comes to convincing people to make healthier food choices, Dr. Traci Mann and her lab at the University of Minnesota, Twin Cities, conducted field and lab experiments to learn how people responded to framing healthy food options.

Dr. Mann's investigations showed that in elementary school cafeterias, serving broccoli or red peppers first led over four times as many students to eat the vegetable than on a normal day in which the vegetable was served alongside other food offerings. The researchers followed up the experiment in a lab setting, providing various types of snacks, and found similar results.

Mann's lab also found adults responds better to healthy symbols rather than the word "healthy."

In one field study with about 400 adults; 65% took an apple (instead of candy) if the healthy heart symbol was on the sign, but only 45% took an apple if the word "healthy" was on the sign. In another field study of about 300 adults, 20% took carrots (instead of chips) if a sign said

"healthy," and 30% took carrots if sign had healthy heart symbol on it.

According to Dr. Mann, "The word 'healthy' seems to turn people off, particularly when it appears on foods that are obviously healthy. The subtle health message, such as the [healthy heart](#) symbol, seemed to be more effective at leading people to choose a healthy option."

More information: The results were presented as part of the Society for Personality and Social Psychology 17th Annual Convention. The symposium, From the Bedroom to the Kitchen Table: Common Pathways that guide Appetites for Food and Mates occurred Friday January 29th at the San Diego Convention Center.

Provided by Society for Personality and Social Psychology

Citation: Lasting impressions: Psychologists discover what influences our food choices (2016, January 29) retrieved 24 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2016-01-psychologists-food-choices.html>

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