10 Attitudes and beliefs in food habits

RICHARD SHEPHERD and MONIQUE M. RAATS

10.1 Models of food choice

The choice of foods by free-living individuals is an area of concern for many people involved in the production and distribution of foods, but also for those concerned with nutrition and health education. Despite a great deal of knowledge gained on the impacts of diet on health and on specific diseases (Committee on Medical Aspects of Food Policy, 1994), relatively little is known about how and why people choose the foods that make up their diets or about how to influence their choices in an effective way. Given recommendations, for example, to reduce fat in the diet or increase the consumption of fruit and vegetables, it is then necessary to understand what determines people’s choices of foods and what obstacles there might be to such changes. Although official recommendations have been in place in the UK since the report by COMA in 1984 (Committee on Medical Aspects of Food Policy, 1984) for a reduction in the energy in the diet derived from fat there has been relatively little change (Committee on Medical Aspects of Food Policy, 1994).

Food choice, like any complex human behaviour, will be influenced by many interrelating factors. A number of models seeking to delineate the effects of likely influences have been put forward in the literature (e.g. Khan, 1981; Pilgrim, 1957; Randall and Sanjur, 1981; Shepherd, 1985; reviewed by Shepherd, 1989). However, few of these models present any indication of likely mechanisms of action of the multitude of factors identified, nor do they quantify the relative importance of, or interactions between, factors. Likewise they do not allow any quantitative tests which are predictive of food choice. To date many such models are really only catalogues of the likely influences although as such they are useful in pointing to the variables to consider in studies in this area.

An example of such a model is shown in Figure 10.1. The factors influencing food choice are categorised as those related to the food, to the person making the choice and to the external economic and social environment within which the choice is made. Some of the chemical and physical properties of the food will be perceived by the person in terms of sensory attributes, e.g. flavour, texture or appearance. Simply perceiving these sensory attributes in a particular food does not necessarily mean that a person will or will not choose to consume that food. Rather it is the person’s liking...
for that attribute in that particular food which will be the determining factor. Other chemical components in the foods, such as the amount of protein or carbohydrate, will have effects upon the person, e.g. reducing hunger, and the learning of the association between the sensory attributes of a food and its post-ingestional consequences appears to be a major mechanism by which preferences develop. Psychological differences between people, such as personality, may also influence food choice (Shepherd and Farleigh, 1986). There are also many factors in the context within which the choice is made that are likely to be very important. These include marketing and economic variables as well as social, cultural, religious or demographic factors (Murcott, 1989; Shepherd, 1989).

### 10.2 Theory of planned behaviour

Many of the influences on food choice are likely to be mediated by the beliefs and attitudes held by an individual. Beliefs about the nutritional quality and health effects of a food may be more important than the actual nutritional quality and health consequences in determining a person’s choice. Likewise various marketing, economic, social, cultural, religious or demographic factors may act through the attitudes and beliefs held by the person. Thus the study of the relationship between choice and the beliefs and attitudes held by a person offers one possible route towards a better understanding of the influence of different factors on food choice.

The idea behind measuring attitudes is that they are thought to be causally related to behaviour. This is true both in the common use of the term attitude and in the research literature in social psychology (Eagly and