8 Modelling food choice
R. SHEPHERD and P. SPARKS

8.1 Introduction

He would definitely have to acquire better eating habits. Learning to cook vegetables would be a good place to start. It was more of developing the habit than anything else, if he could just get into the habit of it, of buying carrots and turnips and cabbage etcetera. (James Kelman, A Disaffection, 1989, pp. 267-8.)

Food choice is a primary concern to those involved in producing and manufacturing foods since their major interest is in selling food products. However, it is increasingly being recognised that there are important nutritional questions related to food choice. Food choice determines nutritional status and in so far as there are influences of diet on health and disease (Committee on Medical Aspects of Food Policy, 1984; WHO, 1991), it is of vital importance to understand the processes by which choices are made. In particular, only with an adequate understanding of the reasons for people's choice of foods can we attempt to change choices and hence influence dietary patterns in line with recommendations from those involved in promoting health. These nutritional questions are potentially more complex than, for example, those which involve choices between brands of the same type of food (which are likely to be seen as highly similar alternatives by the consumer) since they relate to choices between types of foods: choices which may lead, for example, to diets high or low in fat, or to diets high or low in salt content. With an increasingly plentiful and varied food supply the issue of the reasons for food choice becomes extremely important for the area of nutrition.

8.2 Factors influencing food choice

Food choice, like any complex human behaviour, will be influenced by many interrelating factors. There have been a number of models proposed which seek to delineate the effects of likely influences (Yudkin, 1956; Pilgrim, 1957; Khan, 1981; Randall and Sanjur, 1981; Shepherd, 1985). These models are broadly similar although they differ in emphasis. In general these models are not quantitative. They do not attempt to
Figure 8.1 Factors influencing food preferences (from Khan, 1981; reproduced with permission CRC Press).

Figure 8.2 Factors influencing food preferences (from Randall and Sanjur, 1981; reproduced with permission Gordon Breach Science Publishers).