The Effects of Food and Gender on Interpersonal Perceptions

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Male and female subjects provided ratings of personal traits, femininity and masculinity, and total caloric consumption for a female or a male target based on the type of diet she or he had allegedly consumed. The gender associated with the foods presented for each dietary profile was manipulated. Results showed that Target Gender and Dietary Profile significantly affected impression ratings and calorie estimates. Both male and female subjects perceived male eaters and those who ate a feminine diet more favorably. Results are discussed in terms of the different underlying expectations held for males and females when food consumption is involved during the impression formation process.

People use a variety of criteria to conceptualize their everyday food choices and related eating behavior. In explaining why they choose to eat the foods they do, both males and females typically mention dimensions such as the pleasure derived from the food, the health value associated with it, and the convenience of obtaining it (Rappaport, Peters, Downey, McCann & Huff-Corzine, 1993). Absent from the above criteria is the concept of establishing social identity. Although the evidence is currently limited to a few studies, the earliest research on food preferences suggested that the type of food (Sadalla & Barroughs, 1981) and the amount of food consumed (Pliner & Chaiken, 1990) may be a way for individuals to establish a desired social image. Essentially, food choices may provide a source of social information about others during the interpersonal perception process.

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There is accumulating evidence that for women, the type and amount of food consumed may indeed provide the foundation for impression formation. Social perceptions of women have been directly linked to their specific eating habits. One line of research has investigated the effects of meal size on impression ratings of women. Women who consume relatively small meals are rated as more feminine and concerned about physical appearance (Chaiken & Pliner, 1987) and more socially appealing (Basow & Kobrynowicz, 1993) than their counterparts who consume larger amounts of food. Another line of research which has explored the effects of meal type on impression ratings of women varied the overall fat content but not the amount eaten by a hypothetical college female. Mooney, DeTore and Malloy (1994) found that both male and female raters reported more favorable impressions of the female who ate the more fat-restrictive diet. Compared to the female college student who preferred a higher fat diet, the fat-restricted eater was rated as being more attractive, intelligent, conscientious, and calmer. Although women do not report choosing foods because of the social image they may wish to project, some research on eating behavior in a social context implies that women are conscious of the effects of food consumption on the development of interpersonal impressions (Klesges, Bartsch, Norwood, Kautzman & Haugrud, 1984; Mori, Chaiken & Pliner, 1987).

For women, a strong link exists between their food choices and their pursuit of a thin, ideal body shape. The attention that women pay to their food consumption is supported by the evidence that compared to men, women diet more (Connor-Greene, 1988; Drewnowski & Yee, 1987), purchase and consume more dietary products (Jasper & Klassen, 1990) and consistently score higher on measures of disordered eating behavior (Brenner & Cunningham, 1992; Pliner, Chaiken & Flett, 1990). Women's greater preoccupation with food is likely responsible for their greater anxiety about food and eating (Brenner & Cunningham, 1992; Pliner et al., 1990) and their more complex conceptualization of food, particularly as it relates to health (Rappaport et al., 1993). Women, more than men, use restrictive eating as a means of achieving their ideal body shape and as Fallon & Rozin (1985) have suggested, there is a widely held assumption that achieving an ideal body requires little attention to food intake for most men, in contrast to the great deal of attention to restricting intake required for most women. However, while the eating behaviors of women are probably more important in others' impressions of women than of men (Leary, Thividjian & Kraxberger, 1994), we cannot be completely sure of this assumption because the evidence about perceptions of male eating behavior is still rather limited.