

I'll Have What She's Having:
Forming Impressions of an Individual as a Function of Food Choices

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Consumption stereotypes (i.e., judgments of others based on food choices) are a relatively understudied area of psychology. The current studies investigated whether people judge individuals differently based on: whether they are making healthy or unhealthy food choices; whether they are making food choices for another individual (i.e., a child); and whether they engage in disordered eating behavior.

Studies have demonstrated that we differentially judge individuals who eat healthy versus unhealthy food; we rate healthy eaters more positively than unhealthy ones (Oakes & Slotterback, 2005) and we perceive healthy eaters to be more moral than unhealthy eaters (Stein & Nemeroff, 1995). Furthermore, we tend to rate those who eat healthy as more “feminine” and those who eat unhealthy as more “masculine” regardless of gender (Vartanian, Herman, & Polivy, 2007). Some research also exists about the motives underlying individual diet choices (e.g., decisions to follow a vegetarian diet); however, little research has been conducted regarding what impressions are formed about individuals who make food decisions for others (e.g., parents who make food decisions for their children). Finally, unhealthy/disordered eating influences evaluations of an individual. Anorexia is characterized by an extreme restriction of food to avoid weight gain. Orthorexia also involves the restriction of food but individuals with orthorexia refrain from consuming foods that are not perceived as “pure/healthy” (Brytek-Matera, 2012).

The presentation will describe a series of studies that manipulate variables via vignettes. For the first study, participants were presented with a male or female student photographed in front of a (healthy/unhealthy) vending machine on a college campus and asked to evaluate the student along several dimensions (e.g., attribute scale; social appeal questions). In the second study, the motive for a parent (mom/dad) feeding a child a vegan diet were manipulated (e.g., allergies, animal welfare), as well as the socioeconomic status (cashier/ attorney) of the parent. Participants then rated the parent along several dimensions (e.g., intelligence, whether they were a good parent). For the final study, participants were presented with a vignette describing a person who had either anorexic or orthorexic behaviors. Furthermore, the person was characterized as either male or female and as a member of a particular race. Both gender and race were manipulated via the name and the use of gendered pronouns in the vignette. Students then rated the individual on several social appeal questions, an attribute scale and how likely they were to recommend that the target seeks treatment.

The studies suggest that targets are evaluated differently across all three studies, such that the type of food (healthy/unhealthy) influences judgments of an individual, the motive for feeding a child influences the evaluation of a parent, and the degree of disordered eating leads to differential evaluations of a person. The results, taken together, suggest that the combination of

individual difference variables and food consumption may lead people to make differential attributions about a target person.