



# The persistence of and resistance to social norms regarding the appropriate amount to Eat: A preliminary investigation



Justin R. Feeney<sup>a,\*</sup>, Patricia Pliner<sup>b</sup>, Janet Polivy<sup>b</sup>, C. Peter Herman<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup> University of Western Ontario, Canada

<sup>b</sup> University of Toronto, Canada

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## ABSTRACT

We conducted a preliminary investigation on the resistance to, and persistence of, social influence regarding the appropriate amount to eat, defined in terms of eating an amount similar to that eaten by a confederate. Participants ate pizza both alone and in the presence of remote confederates presenting either a high or low eating norm. In the portion of the experiment examining resistance to social influence, participants given an initial opportunity to form a personal eating norm by eating alone for one session in the absence of social influence were no more resistant to low eating norms than were those who had no such opportunity; however, those who ate alone for two or three prior sessions did show resistance. For the high eating norm, it took three eating alone sessions to create resistance. In the portion of the experiment examining persistence of social influence, when participants ate alone following a session with norm-setting remote confederates, the effect of the social influence persisted. However, the persistence effect varied by norm and weakened over time. Participants modeled a low eating norm for only one additional session and the size of the effect was markedly weaker. By contrast, the high norm persisted for all of the remaining sessions. Thus, individuals' social influence *histories* can affect their eating.

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## 1. Introduction

Despite the common assumption that human eating behavior is controlled by physiological factors, there is considerable evidence supporting the importance of non-physiological factors (e.g., Herman & Polivy, 1983) as determinants of food intake. Important among such factors are social norms that proscribe eating excessively; indeed, big eaters receive the disapprobation of their peers, as do those who disregard social norms in other domains, whereas those who eat lightly attract positive attributions and approval (Vartanian, Herman, & Polivy, 2007; Vartanian, Spanos, Herman, & Polivy, 2015). Herman, Roth, and Polivy's (2003) normative model posits that, in the presence of palatable food, people will eat as much as possible unless they are subjected to other pressures, such as restrictive norms governing appropriate intake. Thus, social norms serve an inhibitory function, indicating the point at which individuals must stop eating if they are to avoid the imputation of

excessive intake. Information on which to base one's beliefs about appropriate (i.e., non-excessive) amounts can come from at least two sources: the behavior of others and the eating situation itself.

Herman et al. (2003) normative model presupposes that, prior to ascertaining those norms, people may be uncertain about how much to eat, and cannot rely on their introspection of hunger or satiety to provide guidance (Herman & Polivy, 2005). If the eating situation is unfamiliar, there may be uncertainty as to whether it should be viewed as a meal or a snack (Pliner & Zec, 2007), or perhaps the food provided may be unfamiliar or presented in unfamiliar units. Further, if impression-management concerns are high, people might seek normative cues from others or from the situation to prevent the social disapproval attendant upon non-normative behavior, even if they are already confident in how much it is appropriate to eat (Spanos, Vartanian, Herman, & Polivy, 2014).

There are also occasions when people have a very clear idea of how much they should be eating in that situation, although others may have different ideas. People seem to know, for example, that one submarine sandwich is an appropriate amount to eat for lunch; whether, however, the appropriate size is 6 inches or 12 inches

\* Corresponding author. Department of Psychology, SSC 7418, University of Western Ontario, N6A 5C2 London, Ontario, Canada.

E-mail address: [jfeeney3@uwo.ca](mailto:jfeeney3@uwo.ca) (J.R. Feeney).

depends upon the individual. It may be that these individual (“personal”) norms are a kind of habit (Herman & Polivy, 2005), perhaps initially based on the satiety value of a particular amount of food eaten at a particular time (Brunstrom, 2014). These personal norms may also be due to something more accidental, such as what happened to be in the refrigerator during a foraging expedition, but maintained subsequently through sheer repetition. There are few data pertaining to personal eating norms (see H. B. Lewis et al., 2015; for an exception). However, quite a few studies have examined the effects on eating of norms derived from observation of others, and from the situation.

### 1.1. Social eating norms

The importance of social norms as regulators of eating may be seen in studies of modeling or conformity, in which a participant is paired with one or more experimental confederates whose eating behavior has been scripted, providing normative information. Comprehensive reviews and meta-analyses (Cruwys, Bevelander, & Hermans, 2015; Robinson, Thomas, Aveyard, & Higgs, 2014; Vartanian et al., 2015) examining the effects of social modeling on food intake have consistently found that participants eating with one or more confederates follow the behavior of the confederate(s) in that they eat more or less depending on the behavior of their eating partner(s). In a review of 69 food-modeling studies (Cruwys et al., 2015), all but five provided evidence for a robust modeling effect, despite a wide array of individual differences and contextual factors among the studies. A meta-analysis (Vartanian et al., 2015) also found that this effect is fairly robust across studies ( $r = 0.31$  in experimental studies,  $r = 0.56$  in correlational studies). Interestingly, some people seem to be aware of this influence, accurately reporting the extent that the social norm affected their food intake (Robinson & Field, 2015), but others, with particular personalities and who do not see use of social norms as appropriate guides to intake deny such effects (Spanos et al., 2014).

### 1.2. Persistence of social eating norms

In the present research we are interested in the persistence of social norms, that is, the extent to which their effects remain once the source of the normative information on which they are based is no longer present. Previous studies have shown that individuals tend to form habitual personal norms once they become familiar with a situation or context, and that this personal norm may be initially influenced by external sources (Cialdini & Trost, 1998). Therefore, individuals may internalize an eating norm provided in a laboratory context if they are repeatedly exposed to it. Moreover, individuals will continue to follow the norm even in the absence of the information that served as the basis for the norm. In one study, researchers paired children with a low and high social eating norm in one session and then held a “free” eating session a few days later (Bevelander, Anschutz, & Engels, 2012). The researchers found that overweight children modeled the high food intake norm and continued to follow it when eating alone, thus suggesting that eating norms can be internalized and persist when the model is no longer present. We wanted to examine this same question with adults and examine if eating norms would persist for more than one session.

### 1.3. Resistance to social eating norms

We were also interested in answering the opposite question: Can we arrange for participants to form their own personal eating norms in the laboratory setting and thereby become resistant to subsequent socially-derived eating norms? Comprehensive

reviews of the literature have shown that the social modeling effect is robust (Vartanian et al., 2015), and researchers have had difficulty finding conditions under which people will not follow socially-derived eating norms.

Still, there is reason to believe that a strong personal norm may override one’s tendency to adhere to norms provided by others. For example, Deutsch and Gerard (1955) found that when individuals were asked to make judgments about stimuli before hearing the judgments of others, and then to judge the same stimuli again after hearing them, they were less likely to conform to others’ judgments than were individuals who made only the post-influence judgments. Deutsch and Gerard found that all forms of commitment to their initial judgment reduced the effects of subsequent social influence, but that resistance to social influence was particularly robust when there was a record of individuals’ initial commitment, as opposed to when the commitment went unrecorded. Therefore, commitment to a judgment or personal norm reduces the effects of social influence (Cialdini & Goldstein, 2004). Thus, we expect that when people form a personal eating norm, they will become (at least somewhat) resistant to the social modeling effect.

Surprisingly, very little research on eating behavior has examined the persistence of personal norms (with the exception of Bevelander et al., 2012) or resistance to social norms after formation of personal norms. Such research may yield important theoretical insights and may have practical implications for modifying eating behavior. Recently, researchers have argued that social influence may provide a powerful tool for getting people to eat in a healthier fashion (Robinson, Blissett, & Higgs, 2013).

Given the above review, we derived two hypotheses:

**H<sub>1</sub>:** Participants will continue to conform to eating norms established by a confederate when the confederate is no longer present.

**H<sub>2</sub>:** Participants will form a personal eating norm if they eat alone in the same setting multiple times and this personal norm will weaken the effects of subsequent exposure to social eating norms.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Overview and design

Under the pretext of examining the effects of television viewing on mood, participants watched half-hour segments of a popular television show, with the opportunity to eat pizza offered supposedly as compensation for a three-hour fast prior to each session. We examined resistance to and persistence of social norms during a period of up to four days to give participants sufficient time to form resistance to norms or to internalize our manipulated norms. Because of the logistical difficulties of using live confederates as sources of normative information, we used a “remote-confederate” paradigm (e.g., Feeney, Polivy, Pliner, & Sullivan, 2011). In the remote-confederate paradigm, no live confederate is present; instead, a sheet of paper listing the amounts allegedly eaten by ten previous participants is “inadvertently” left in the participant’s view and remains in her view throughout the session. This procedure has been shown to produce an effect on participants’ eating that is equivalent to that produced by the live-confederate procedure (Feeney et al., 2011), and this technique has been used in at least ten other studies (Vartanian et al., 2015).

This study was divided into two main sections: one related to persistence of and the other related to resistance to social norms. In the persistence section, participants were randomly assigned to the low norm (L), high norm (H), or control conditions. In the first session, participants were paired with remote confederates that

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