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Research report

Threatened belonging and preference for comfort food among the securely attached ☆

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ABSTRACT

Research has shown that comfort food triggers relationship-related cognitions and can fulfill belongingness needs for those secure in attachment (i.e., for those with positive relationship cognitions) (Troisi & Gabriel, 2011). Building on these ideas, we examined if securely attached individuals prefer comfort food because of its "social utility" (i.e., its capacity to fulfill belongingness needs) in one experiment and one daily diary study using two samples of university students from the United States. Study 1 ($n = 77$) utilized a belongingness threat essay among half of the participants, and the results showed that securely attached participants preferred the taste of a comfort food (i.e., potato chips) more after the belongingness threat. Study 2 ($n = 86$) utilized a 14-day daily diary design and found that securely attached individuals consumed more comfort food in response to naturally occurring feelings of isolation. Implications for the social nature of food preferences are discussed.

Introduction

People eat food to satisfy hunger, because food tastes good, out of habit, and even out of boredom. Recent research suggests another reason why people eat: certain kinds of food – foods people identify as *comfort foods* – can trigger feelings of relational connection, particularly among those with strong social ties (i.e., secure attachment style, Troisi & Gabriel, 2011). Comfort foods are foods that people consume in order to attain psychologically comfortable or pleasant states (Wansink, Cheney, & Chan, 2003), and they often do so when specific circumstances elicit a desire for their consumption (Wansink & Sangerman, 2000). Self-reported definitions of comfort foods also highlight aspects of the food related to the consumption context, the consumption experience, and relational associations with the food (LeBel, Lu, & Dubé, 2008). Indeed, comfort food seems to be strongly associated with people's social and emotional functioning. However, to date, research has not explored how the social nature of comfort food may influence people's preference for it. Thus, the current research sought to determine if people's preferences for comfort food are shaped by its ability to make people feel socially connected, or what we henceforth call its "social utility."

Food choices and preferences

Numerous factors contribute to food consumption and evaluations of food. Unsurprisingly, people tend to evaluate highly palatable foods, like those high in sugar and fat, more favorably than less palatable food (e.g., Berridge, 2009; de Castro, Bellisle, Dalix, & Pearcey, 2000; Le Magnen, 1986). Indeed, for evolutionary reasons, organisms have developed preferences for such foods in order to maintain the homeostatic processes necessary to ensure their survival (e.g., appropriate calorie intake, body fat stores, vitamin levels) (e.g., Harris, Clay, Hargreaves, & Ward, 1933; Hebb, 1955; Hepper, 1988). The current research extends beyond physiological reasons for food consumption to focus on social reasons for food consumption, which also play a critical role in understanding food preferences (Wansink et al., 2003). From an early age, humans' preferences for particular foods are shaped by social factors. For example, children develop preferences for foods they have been exposed to more frequently (Sullivan & Birch, 1990), and foods that are paired with attention from adults (Birch, Zimmerman, & Hind, 1980). The development of preferences for these particular food items among children indicates that food plays a role in people's social lives.

People's ongoing emotional experiences also shape eating behavior and perceptions of food. For example, people often report an increased appetite (Kandiah, Yake, Jones, & Meyer, 2006) and consume more food when they experience negative emotions, presumably as an attempt to alleviate or cope with such negative emotions (e.g., Arnow, Kenardy, & Agras, 1995; van Strien, Frijters, Bergers, & Defares, 1986; Yacono Freeman & Gil, 2004). The experience of negative emotions is often the result of thwarted

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psychological needs, and increased eating in response to negative emotions may be a result of such thwarted needs. Indeed, there is strong evidence that people are motivated to fulfill psychological needs, including the desire to establish and maintain a sense of connection with others (Baumeister, Brewer, Tice, & Twenge, 2007; Ryan & Deci, 2000). Numerous researchers have pointed out that the need for social connection drives many cognitions, emotions, and behaviors, and failure to satisfy this need can have detrimental consequences, including anxiety, loneliness, depression, and other psychological disorders (Bartholomew, Ntoumanis, Ryan, Bosch, & Thøgersen-Ntoumani, 2011; Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Leary, 1990). As previous research has demonstrated, people are more likely to engage in emotional eating and food consumption when their psychological needs, particularly needs for social connection, are unfulfilled (Andrews, Lowe, & Clair, 2011; Baumeister, DeWall, Ciarocco, & Twenge, 2005; Oaten, Williams, Jones, & Zadro, 2008; Oliver, Huon, Zadro, & Williams, 2001; Raspopow, Matheson, Abizaid, & Anisman, 2013; Robinson, Tobias, Shaw, Freeman, & Higgs, 2011; Timmerman & Acton, 2001).

We contend that one reason why people's interest in food is piqued during the experience of negative emotions is because some foods are linked with feelings of belonging (e.g., Birch et al., 1980; Oliver et al., 2001; Troisi & Gabriel, 2011; Wansink & Sangerman, 2000; Wansink et al., 2003). Furthermore, because of the risks associated with poor social connections, including dangers such as mental and physical health problems (Bartholomew et al., 2011; Leary, 1990), physical pain (Eisenberger, Lieberman, & Williams, 2003), and increased risk of suicide (Rothberg & Jones, 1987), finding ways to mitigate threatened feelings of belonging in the absence of close relationships is imperative. Previous research suggests that social surrogates, such as watching one's favorite television show or reading a novel (Derrick, Gabriel, & Hugenberg, 2009; Gabriel & Young, 2011), can satiate the need for belongingness. Recent research has also identified comfort food as a social surrogate (Troisi & Gabriel, 2011). In addition to being able to alleviate feelings of loneliness (and perhaps because of it), we argue that comfort food will also be especially preferred because it can reduce feelings of belongingness threat. When people alter their motivation and behavior toward food because of negative emotions, feelings of isolation, past experiences with food, and its overall social significance, it is clear that food plays a role well beyond that of mere satiety. Furthermore, if people experience a greater motivation to consume food when they experience heightened social needs, it may also be true that people's perceptions of that food's taste would be altered as well. Indeed, just as the body craves salt when it needs to retain water and fat when it needs to retain energy stores (e.g., Gilhooly et al., 2007; Morris, Na, & Johnson, 2008), perhaps it craves foods that provide emotional comfort during the experience of psychological stressors such as threats to belongingness. A rich literature on food consumption as a method of self-medication supports this notion (e.g., Dallman, Pecoraro, & la Fleur, 2005; Tsenkova, Boylan, & Ryff, 2013; Yacono Freeman & Gil, 2004).

Comfort food and its social utility

Although many would describe comfort foods as foods that are low in healthful properties, research shows that such foods are better defined as foods which help people attain a psychologically comfortable or pleasant state (Wansink et al., 2003), and by reducing feelings of loneliness after a social threat (Troisi & Gabriel, 2011). Lending credibility to the fact that comfort food is not a term simply synonymous with unhealthy food, the foods people come to consider comfort foods differ based on factors such as gender (e.g., Wansink et al., 2003), age (e.g., Dubé, LeBel, & Lu, 2005), and geographical region (e.g., Gerding & Weinstein, 1992). Indeed, comfort foods are idiosyncratic to the individual and most people's perceptions of comfort food seem to highlight social factors related to the food. Self-reported definitions of comfort food highlight aspects of the food related to the consumption context, the consumption experience, and relational ties and associations with the food (LeBel et al., 2008).

It is true that many individuals consume comfort food in an attempt to alleviate numerous negative emotional experiences (e.g., Wansink et al., 2003). However, it is also true that the effectiveness of comfort food at eliminating negative emotions, broadly defined, is questionable. Indeed, some recent research suggests that comfort food is not effective at eliminating general states of sadness (Wagner, Ahlstrom, Redden, Vickers, & Mann, 2014). In an attempt to clarify the means through which comfort food may produce its effects, Troisi and Gabriel (2011) established the link between comfort food and feelings of interpersonal connection, suggesting that comfort food can serve as a reminder of others. In their first experiment on this topic, they found that participants who were given the opportunity to consume their comfort food (i.e., chicken noodle soup) showed heightened cognitive activation of the relationship concept compared to participants who did not consider the soup to be a comfort food. A second experiment examined the ways in which comfort food may protect against feelings of social isolation. Because comfort foods are associated with relationships, (Troisi & Gabriel, 2011, Experiment 1) comfort foods should only be protective if relationship cognitions are positive (i.e., if the food serves a positive social function). Securely attached individuals have generally positive associations with and trust in relationships, whereas those who are not securely attached have more mixed and often negative experiences with relationships (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991; Griffin & Bartholomew, 1994; Mikulincer, 1998; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007; Mikulincer, Shaver, Sapir-Lavid, & Avihou-Kanza, 2009). An abundance of evidence indicates that securely attached individuals perceive others as reliable, loving, and concerned with their sense of well-being, whereas those who are not securely attached are more fearful and concerned about achieving consistent love and care from others (e.g., Konrath, Chopik, Hsing, & O'Brien, 2014; Mikulincer, 1998; Shaver & Hazan, 1993). Thus, people with different attachment styles have significantly different ways in which they view their relationships with others. Consequently, in their second experiment, Troisi and Gabriel (2011) predicted and found that comfort food reduced feelings of loneliness from a belongingness threat, but only among those with a more favorable view of others (i.e., those with a secure attachment style).

In summary, research has provided preliminary evidence that comfort food has social utility. Comfort foods serve as a reminder of social relationships, and they can ease feelings of belongingness threat among those who are securely attached. Drawing from past work on food preferences, emotional eating, the need to belong, and social surrogates, in the current research we examine whether comfort food is enjoyable *because* of its social utility. Specifically, we suggest that people should prefer comfort food more if it can alleviate a threatened sense of social connection – as it should if it serves as a reminder of favorable, but not unfavorable, social relationships. We hypothesized that the taste and likelihood of consuming comfort food should be influenced by current feelings of isolation and enduring perceptions of relationships with others (i.e., attachment style). Using an experimental design in a controlled laboratory, Study 1 examined the hypothesis that taste evaluations of a comfort food would be more favorable among individuals who are securely attached (vs. non-securely attached) and have been exposed to a belongingness threat. Using a daily diary design, Study 2 examined the hypothesis that people who are securely attached should be more likely to consume comfort food in response to feelings of isolation than those who are non-securely attached.