



Does an early socialization into a food culture condition lifelong food preferences? Evidence from a retrospective study



Mircea-Lucian Scrob

History Department, Central European University, Nador 9, 1051 Budapest, Hungary

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ABSTRACT

The influence of early formed dietary practices on food choices and preferences during adulthood has often been assumed but rarely adequately demonstrated given the difficulty of studying the subject matter with conventional laboratory or observational research designs. This article examines this assumption by analyzing the information from 31 structured interviews on the respondents' current preferences for combinations of six side dishes with bread or mămăligă (boiled cornmeal mush, similar to polenta). All the respondents had consumed mămăligă in their childhood but in their adulthood had switched to bread following the social and economic upheavals from 1960s Romania. The results show that a) for specific combinations, physiological factors and/or cultural norms that defined bread as a 'prestigious' food have been capable of overriding the effects of early socialization with mămăligă as the accompanying food and b) that consumers continue to prefer certain side dishes with mămăligă even after decades of predominant consumption of bread although confounding factors might account for such preferences. These findings qualify the expectation that an early familiarization with healthy eating habits will promote this desired lifestyle during adulthood by showing that physiological and socio-cultural factors are capable of overriding its effects on hedonic preferences.

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1. Introduction

Early formed dietary practices and food preferences have been listed among the factors that could explain an individual's subsequent food preferences (Birch, 1999). Such influences, if verified, would legitimize early intervention programs as one of the strategies for promoting healthy eating habits in adults over and above the benefits of adhering to a healthy lifestyle as early in an individual's life as possible. For instance, an early familiarization with consumption of vegetables could promote their consumption during a person's adulthood by genuinely modifying the perception that vegetables 'taste bad' and/or by shaping normative expectations concerning what should be included in a proper meal. Despite its potential contribution, relatively few studies have examined the issue with the result that the influence of early formed dietary practices and preferences on latter life food preferences is only assumed without having been adequately demonstrated (Mikkilä, Räsänen, Raitakari, Pietinen, & Viikari, 2005; Patterson, Wärmberg, Kearney, & Sjöström, 2009). The present study

addresses this gap in the literature by assessing whether, and to what extent, such an influence operates.

The assumption that an early familiarization with certain foods promotes a preference for these foods over functionally equivalent alternatives has much to recommend it in terms of theoretical premises. Specifically, food neophobia, the 'mere' exposure effect, evaluative conditioning and the consumers' predilection to form norms and expectations concerning the appropriate food combinations at specific meals based on their early dietary experiences suggest, separately or taken together, that such an effect should be observed. Taken each separately, the neophobic reaction - which, according to researchers, is weak up to the age of 2 years when the child incorporates solid foods into his/her regular diet, becomes stronger between the ages of 2 and 4 years and then declines gradually throughout adolescence and adulthood (Pliner & Salvy, 2006) – forms the first barrier against the adoption of an unfamiliar food. The 'mere' exposure theory postulates that preference for a stimulus increases with its repeated exposure and such effects have been confirmed for a variety of stimuli including novel and disliked foods (Anzman-Frasca, Savage, Marini, Fischer, & Birch, 2012; Pliner, 1982). The exact processes behind the 'mere' exposure effect have not yet been entirely elucidated (Zajonc, 2001) but

E-mail address: scrob_lucian@yahoo.com.

researchers generally agree that consumers initially rate unfamiliar foods low on liking tests and increase their ratings with repeated exposure to those foods subject to certain limits imposed by food 'boredom'. As a result, familiar foods have a comparative advantage over novel foods which can function as economically viable substitutes in the sense that even if a consumer is willing to try a new food, the initial impression is less favorable relative to the established food. The evaluative conditioning paradigm postulates that a conditioned stimulus (CS) may acquire a positive or negative valence in accordance with the valence of an unconditioned stimulus (US) with which it has been paired (De Houwer, Thomas, & Baeyens, 2001; Hofmann, De Houwer, Perugini, Baeyens, & Crombez, 2010; Kuenzel et al., 2011). Such processes of evaluative conditioning have been considered to mediate the formation of comfort and nostalgia foods and have been proposed as an explanation for the 'mere' exposure effect with suggestions that the repeated consumption of a food (CS) merely increases its chances of becoming associated with the post-ingestion consequences or positive social contexts of consumption (US-'more' exposure theory) (Mela, 2001). Overall, the process of evaluative conditioning is not expected to invariably promote a preference for the established foods since the valence these foods may acquire depend on how the context of their consumption is perceived and, in this sense, childhood or early adolescence may be experienced either negatively or positively. Nevertheless, because consumers frequently resist the introduction of new foods given their neophobic predispositions and the uneven impact of the 'mere' exposure process, the contexts in which dietary changes take place usually presuppose the exertion of strong pressures on consumers which generally contributes to a negative mood that may get transferred to the new food. Finally, consumers form expectations and submit to social norms regulating the proper or improper context, time and meal structure for consuming a food with the result that the same food may be liked under one set of circumstances but disliked under another. For example, Birch and colleagues have found that both adults and children change their relative preferences defined hedonically for foods which they have classified as 'breakfast foods' or 'dinner foods' depending on whether these are consumed at breakfast or at lunch (Birch, Billman, & Richards, 1984). Cardello and colleagues (Cardello, Schutz, Snow, & Leshner, 2000) and Kramer and colleagues (Kramer, Rock, & Engell, 1992) have failed to replicate such findings but nonetheless have also reported strong correlations between consumers' evaluations of how appropriate the consumption of a food is in specific contexts and their expected liking/disliking for it. Accordingly, these authors have suggested that the perceived appropriateness of a food is more important when it comes to selecting a particular meal rather than in influencing consumers' liking of an actually served meal. Such norms are learned by consumers at a very young age through repeated experiences with the food in specific contexts or, alternatively, they are formalized into explicit rules of consumption and handed down to the younger generation. Regardless of the exact mechanism through which dietary habits and expectations are formed, they generally help reinforce the established dietary practices. Taken altogether, the effects of an early socialization into a food culture combine to form a vicious circle supporting dietary conservatism as the consumers' neophobic predispositions reduce the initial appeal of a novel food, the pressure needed to soften their reticence reflects negatively on the new food given evaluative conditioning processes and the presence of dietary habits and of well-defined expectations concerning proper meals and diets increases consumers' resistance towards unfamiliar consumption practices.

The influence of early-formed food practices is less well established when it comes to the empirical evidence that may either support or disqualify it, in part because of the small number of

relevant studies and in part because of the shortcomings of existing studies. In the consumer behavior field, the relative scarcity of relevant studies can be explained by a certain reticence to engage in longitudinal studies as these typically require higher investments of resources than the more common cross-sectional studies. The study of the problem is further complicated by the requirement that the subjects should have had the opportunity to change their dietary practices. Otherwise, their stated preferences might simply reflect the idiosyncrasies of an assessment procedure that asks respondents to choose between their habitual dietary practices and less familiar ones rather than the presence or absence of the influence of an early socialization into dietary practices. Unfortunately, study design limitations and pragmatic methodological choices limit even the contribution that the available studies can make to an adequate understanding of the problem. For instance, Skinner and colleagues (Skinner, Carruth, Wendy, & Ziegler, 2002) have found an average level of consistency of 84.5% between the foods liked, disliked and never tasted by 70 children surveyed successively at ages 2–3, 4 and 8. However, the authors' selection of just three broad categories may have been responsible for the remarkably high level of stability observed in this study given that such highly aggregated categories fail to pick up less dramatic but nonetheless significant changes in the consumers' relative preferences for foods classified within the same category. Nicklaus and colleagues have managed to overcome these limitations and in many respects their study is impressively rigorous (Nicklaus, Boggio, Chabanet, & Issanchou, 2004). Nevertheless, their finding that early food preferences (assessed based on consumption choices) correlated modestly with food preferences during early adulthood may not represent adequately the actual strength of the relationship given that the 'preference' measured in the study had evolved between dietary assessments from an indicator of hedonic liking to a composite indicator which increasingly reflected health, weight and moral concerns. Finally, a number of articles which have analyzed the long-term persistence of dietary patterns and the tracking of nutrient intake have reported moderate to modest levels of stability (Cusatis et al., 2000; Lake, Mathers, Rugg-Gunn, & Adamson, 2006; Madruga, Araújo, Bertoldi, & Neutzling, 2012; Nicklaus & Remy, 2013; Patterson et al., 2009; Sijtsma et al., 2012) with only two studies having found strong consistency in respondents' adherence over 8 and 21 years to broad dietary patterns (healthy vs. unhealthy and traditional vs. health-conscious) identified through factor analysis (Frémeaux et al., 2011; Mikkilä et al., 2005). Nevertheless, the practice of assessing an individual's dietary intake and food habits at different points in time by drawing on data covering a short observation period may be responsible for the modest levels of stability observed in these studies given that any short-term variation in an individual's dietary practices had been picked up and interpreted as evidence of dietary change.

Historical, sociological and anthropological studies provide much stronger evidence for the assumption that early formed dietary practices condition long-term food preferences. A number of studies have reported in this sense that consumers who had replaced one cereal staple with another primarily for economic reasons had, nonetheless, continued to prefer the former cereal staple even decades after the dietary change (Cwiertka, 2006; Lindenbaum, 1987; Moore & Vaughan, 1994; von Oppen, 1999). Nevertheless, the majority of studies from the 'softer' branches of the food studies discipline have not examined the problem in a systematic manner and, accordingly, their general pronouncements that consumers continue to prefer their established dishes over novel dishes may fail to describe adequately the complexity of consumers' preferences.

The primary purpose of this study is to assess whether an early

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