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Dietary restraint, attributional styles for eating, and preloading effects

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Abstract

A total of 319 undergraduates completed the Restraint Scale and an Eating Attributional Style Questionnaire (EASQ). Subsequently, 101 female students participated in the classic preloading experiment. The results indicated that restrained eating was associated with an external locus of control attribution style, particularly for indulgent food consumption (ELCifc). Partial preloading effects for Restraint were found: The amount consumed increased as a function of Restraint in the preload condition. A more complete pattern of preloading was found for the ELCifc attribution style. In addition, the relationship between Restraint and food consumed in the preload condition was no longer significant with the ELCifc attribution style partialled out. The findings supported the hypotheses that: (a) restrained eaters display an external attribution style of learned helplessness and (b) related cognitions serve as a cause of preloading effects. © 2000 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

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1. Introduction

Over the past two decades, there has been a dramatic increase in research on dietary restraint (Allison, 1995; Ruderman, 1986) that has been fostered by concern over the increasing prevalence in Western society of dieting and clinical eating disorder syndromes, such as bulimia (see Brownell & Rodin, 1994). Dietary restraint refers to the extent to which individuals are concerned with their weight and attempt to control it by dieting. An extensive body of researchers has been dedicated to examining the factors that affect the extent to which

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restrained eaters (those high on dietary restraint) and unrestrained eaters (those low on dietary restraint) consume food.

Preloading is one factor that affects food consumption as a function of dietary restraint. Consuming an apparently high calorie food serves to disinhibit food consumption in restrained eaters (i.e., increases food consumption) and to inhibit food consumption in unrestrained eaters (i.e., decreases food consumption) (Herman & Mack, 1975; Hibscher & Herman, 1977; Ruderman & Christensen, 1983). Negative emotional states (e.g., depression and anxiety) have been found to similarly disinhibit food consumption in restrained eaters and inhibit food consumption in unrestrained eaters (Baucom & Aitken, 1981; Frost, Goolkasian, Ely, & Blanchard, 1982; Herman & Polivy, 1975; Ruderman, 1985a; see the review by Ruderman, 1986). Statistically significant effects of preloading and negative emotional states have not been found by all researchers, however (see Dritschel, Cooper, & Charnock, 1992; Jansen, Oosterlaan, Merckelbach, & van de Hoot, 1988; Steere & Cooper, 1993). Heatherton, Herman, and Polivy (1991) found that ego threats (failure on a spatial perception task or threat of giving a talk), but not physical threat (shock), serve as disinhibitors of food consumption in restrained eaters (see also Heatherton, Herman, & Polivy, 1992; Schotte, 1992).

Research on the effects of preloading and negative emotional states have been guided in many studies by Herman and Polivy's (1984) boundary model. According to the model, biological pressures work to maintain consumption within a certain range. The aversive qualities of hunger work to keep consumption above some minimum level, whereas the aversive qualities of satiety work to keep it below some maximum level. The area between the boundaries of hunger and satiety is referred to as the zone of biological indifference. Herman and Polivy (1984) proposed that this zone of biological indifference is wider in restrained than unrestrained eaters, with restrained eaters requiring greater food deprivation to experience hunger and greater food consumption to experience satiety. In addition, the researchers proposed that there was a dietary boundary that was not physiological, but psychological, and consisted of cognitive rules for limiting caloric intake to maintain a desirable weight. For the restrained eater, the diet boundary falls within their zone of biological indifference and is closer to the zone of hunger than satiety. When restrained eaters have not consumed a preload they eat only a small amount of food because anything more would breach their diet boundary. After a preload, however, restrained eaters believe that they have violated the diet boundary and see no further reason to restrict further food consumption, resulting in a binge. Herman and Polivy (1984) referred to this pattern as the "what-the-hell-effect."

The role of cognitive rules for food consumption identified in Herman and Polivy's (1984) theory has prompted some researchers to search for the cognitions associated with restrained eating and, in particular, the cognitive mediators of preloading effects. Some studies reveal that preloading effects occur when restrained eaters were misled to believe that they have eaten high calorie foods (Polivy, 1976; Spencer & Fremouw, 1979) and weighed more than their actual weight (McFarlane, Polivy, & Herman, 1998). The findings have been interpreted as supporting the conclusion that preloading effects are cognitively mediated. Ruderman (1985b) found that dieters were prone to irrational thinking, especially about food and eating that serve to increase their susceptibility to disinhibited eating or

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