

Research Report

Effects of social influence on eating in couples, friends and strangers

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Abstract

Previous research indicates that both males and females eat less in the presence of a stranger of the opposite sex than in the presence of a same sex. Another literature shows that people tend to model or matching the amount eaten by others. The extent to which people are eager to inhibit their food consumption or match other's intake is likely to vary as a function of the characteristics of the co-eater. The present study examines how males and females adjust their level of eating as a function of their familiarity with and the gender of their eating companion, using a free-eating paradigm. Findings indicated that both the familiarity between co-eaters and the participants' gender predicted food consumption. Although unfamiliarity suppressed both men's and women's food intakes, the matching effect operated only when a female co-eater was involved. We conclude that the overarching motive (i.e., producing a positive impression) does not necessarily vary substantially across the various gender-familiarity combinations, but that the means or strategies (eating lightly and or matching of intake) by which the person accomplishes it and the strength of the motive vary as a function of the audience. In other words, in some social contexts self-enhancing motives can be served by restricting intake as well as through ingratulatory strategies such as attitudinal or behavioral conformity.

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Introduction

Food is obviously used to satisfy the body's needs, but it can also serve a communicative function. What and how much you eat communicate more than your culinary preferences; it is a self-presentational statement. You are what you eat! Self-presentation, or impression management, involves regulating one's own behavior to create a specific image for an audience (Leary & Kowalski, 1990; Leary et al., 1994; Schlenker, 1975), and eating behavior may have utility for impression management (Bock & Kanarek, 1995; Mori, Chaiken, & Pliner, 1987; Pliner & Chaiken, 1990). Conveying a positive impression through

eating can manifest itself in eating lightly and through eating conformity (i.e., matching or modeling the amount eaten by someone else).

Studies on impression management through eating lightly show that some eating companions make people more eager to suppress their intake in order to convey a good impression (Mori et al., 1987; Pliner & Chaiken, 1990). These studies have looked at the amount of food people consumed when the characteristics of the eating companion were manipulated. Mori et al. (1987, Experiment 1) found that both male and female participants ate less in the presence of a desirable partner of the opposite sex than in the presence of a less desirable partner. In a second study, women whose feminine identity was threatened (i.e., because they scored "masculine" on a questionnaire) restricted their intake. Pliner and Chaiken (1990)

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replicated Mori et al.'s (1987) findings and explored the reported social motives operating in interpersonal situations. They found that behaving in a socially desirable manner was an important motive for men, while being socially desirable and appearing feminine were important for women. Other research shows that women who eat minimally are viewed more positively than are women who eat a lot (Bock & Kanarek, 1995; Chaiken & Pliner, 1987). Further, it is widely assumed that people become overweight because of a lack of self-control around food (DeJong & Kleck, 1986; Puhl, Schwartz, & Brownell, 2005), and overweight people are stereotyped as lazy, self-indulgent, unattractive, lacking self-esteem, socially inept, uncooperative, and intellectually slow (Allon, 1982; DeJong, 1993; Harris, 1990; Hebl & Heatherton, 1998; Madey & Ondrus, 1999). Thus, individuals' concern about eating too much in front of others and attempts to manage impressions by eating lightly are not totally misguided.

The effect of modeling or matching effect on can be seen most clearly in studies using a conformity paradigm, in which a naïve participant eats in the presence of a confederate whose level of eating is predetermined by the experimenter. These studies have consistently found that participants eat less in the presence of a confederate who eats minimally than in the presence of one who eats a large amount (Conger, Conger, Costanzo, Wright, & Matter, 1980; Goldman, Herman, & Polivy, 1991; Nisbett & Storms, 1974; Roth, Herman, Polivy, & Pliner, 2001; Herman, Roth, & Polivy, 2003). One explanation for these findings is that people believe that by conforming they will ingratiate themselves to others; behavioral similarity will lead others to like and accept them (e.g., Sunnafrank, 1991; Sunnafrank, Ramirez, & Metts, 2004). In the language of Jones and Pittman's (1982) model of self-presentation, matching the intake of the eating companion would have a similar ingratiating function as attitude conformity. However, most studies on eating conformity have averaged the participants' intake and compared these levels of eating to the consumption of experimental confederates who were eating predetermined amounts of food. A more appropriate test of the matching hypothesis would involve assessing the *relationship* between co-eaters' intakes (i.e., correlational analysis).

Most of the findings in the literatures on impression management and matching in eating are based on eating among strangers, so it is not known whether familiarity mediates or moderates these effects. From a self-presentational perspective, people should be more motivated to convey a good impression during their initial interactions with a stranger than with someone who they know well (Leary et al., 1994). This is consistent with findings indicating that individuals use different self-presentation strategies when conversing with different targets, relying on self-enhancement with strangers but shifting toward modesty with friends (Tice, Butler, Muraven, & Stillwell, 1995). The familiarity hypothesis is further reinforced by Clendenen, Herman, and Polivy's (1994) finding that

people ate less dessert when eating with strangers than with friends, although there was no difference in entrée consumption (deli food) between friends and strangers. Presumably, strangers were more concerned with self-enhancement (i.e., appearing socially desirable or feminine) and limited their intake of "forbidden" dessert. Evidence for the familiarity hypothesis also comes from de Castro's findings that social facilitation of eating (people eat more in the presence of others than when they eat alone) appears to be stronger when people eat in the presence of friends and family than when they eat with strangers (de Castro, 1990, 1994).

The studies reviewed above indicate that people sometimes inhibit their food intake when eating with someone else (Mori et al., 1987; Pliner & Chaiken, 1990) and sometimes match their co-eater's food consumption (Nisbett & Storms, 1974; Rosenthal & Marx, 1979; Rosenthal & McSweeney, 1979; Roth et al., 2001). Although, the evidence for impression management and matching (eating conformity) has come from separate literatures, we contend that it is possible for both processes to operate at the same time and to be studied simultaneously. The idea is that overarching motive (i.e., producing a positive impression) does not necessarily vary substantially, but that the means or strategies (eating lightly and or matching of intake) by which the person accomplishes it and the strength of the motive vary as a function of the audience. In some social contexts self-enhancing motives can be served by restricting intake while in others individuals may use ingratiation strategies such as behavioral conformity (Jones & Pittman, 1982).

The present study examines how males and females adjust their level of eating as a function of their familiarity with and the gender of their eating companion, using a free-eating paradigm. In previous matching studies, because the confederates' intake was varied only at two levels, we can conclude only that participants' eating is elevated when the confederate eats a lot compared to when the confederate eats only a little. We cannot determine how well the subjects are "tracking" the confederates' intake. In contrast, the free-eating paradigm allows the formulation of predictions regarding not only the *amount* of food consumed by the two participants, but also the *relationship* between co-eaters' food intake (i.e., matching effect).

We contend that people strategically vary their level of eating with different audiences to fulfill a similar overarching motive of a positive self-presentation. Based on the impression management literature, we predicted that both males and females would eat less in the presence of a partner of the opposite sex than in the presence of a same sex co-eater (Mori et al., 1987; Pliner & Chaiken, 1990). However, we also predicted that the inhibiting effect of an opposite sex co-eater would be moderated by familiarity. Presumably, eating that takes place in the first stages of a relationship is in marked contrast with the eating that occur when partners are well acquainted with each other. Individuals interacting with well-known others are

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