

Explanations for food preferences: the role of learning in food preference, including social and cultural influences.

The learning theory suggest that behaviour stems from classical conditioning, operant conditioning or social learning.

Classical conditioning is learning through association. Here we may develop a preference for new food because it was associated with a flavour we already like. Due to our innate preference for sweetness, we learn to prefer many new foods by sweetening them, for example some people will add sugar to cereal or porridge. This flavour-flavour learning principle suggests that association eventually leads to the liking of new food.

However, there is a lack of substantial evidence for classical conditioning as an explanation for food preferences. Baeyens et al (1996) asked students to taste previously untried flavours. In the experimental group the flavours were paired with a sweet taste, whereas in the control group the flavours were paired with a neutral tasteless flavour. The results showed there were no differences between the two groups in preferences for the new flavours after the pairings. This suggests the flavour-flavour learning principle is an incomplete explanation.

Operant conditioning uses principles of reinforcement such as reward. Children are often positively reinforced for their food preferences mainly by parents or older siblings. This positive reinforcement could be in the form of encouragement or praise and is given each time a child eats a food that is considered desirable. For example, many parents will praise their children for eating green vegetables.

Social Influences

The **social learning theory** explains how social influence particularly modelling and vicarious reinforcement are used in learning food preferences. Children will readily acquire food preferences of the role models they observe eating certain foods. If this role model appears to be rewarded or reinforced, this increases the likelihood of imitative behaviour. This is particularly true if the role model is someone that the child identifies with.

Jansen and tenney (2001) gave children either an energy-dense or energy-dilute yoghurt drink they had never tasted before. The children were noted to prefer the energy-dense drink as this was the one the teacher was drinking, who was also praising the drink and showing signs of enjoyment. This supports modelling in the social learning theory.

Learning food preferences are most obvious within a family setting and parents often act as the 'gatekeepers' of their children's eating particularly when they are young. Other influences such as peers can encourage or discourage eating preferences in young children. Birch (1980) conducted a study in a pre-school lunchroom where each child was seated with three other children who had different vegetable preferences from them. After four days she noted that the participant children had changed their preferences in response to observing the other children on their table. This evidence was compared to a control group where no behavioural changes were observed.

As children get older their social influences change and they may be more inclined to alter their eating habits based on media influence, particularly those seen through television adverts. Hare-Bruun et al (2011) studied a group of 8 to 10 year old Danish boys and girls and found those that watch the most television had the most unhealthy food preferences.

Cultural Influences

One of the biggest cultural changes in the industrial world has been in the increasing availability of food outside the home, such as fast food restaurants. This has been accompanied by a greater preference for foods that can be consumed quickly and tend to be higher in fat, salt and sugar. It is also more socially acceptable for younger people to eat out with friends, rather than stay home for mealtimes with the family.

Cultural issues also play a part, such as those set out by social norms. In some communities foods are restricted due to religious or cultural values. Many culturally determined food preferences centre around meat eating. Some countries consume a lot of meat, whereas others or traditionally meat-free.

There is a link between cultural influence and our experience of learning. We associate many of the foods we eat and enjoy as adults with feelings of security and happiness from growing up. They may be linked in memory to enjoyable special cultural occasions spent with family and friends. These events are nearly always marked by culturally specific food choices. In addition vicarious reinforcement can also play a part because our culture influences which foods are given to children, and children see their own cultural group enjoying these foods. For example, it is common for many British households to get together on Sundays for a roast dinner.

