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Social Networks and Psychological Conditions in Diet Preferences: Gourmets and Vegetarians

Kurt W. Back
Margaret Glasgow
Duke University

The importance of diet as a means of self-expression has yet to be examined closely enough in terms of a social phenomenon; instead, historians, sociologists and anthropologists tend to see food habits as being the natural and rational standards in society. Two groups, self-defined as gourmets or vegetarians, were examined through questionnaires administered by two magazines: the respondents were rated in terms of social background and mobility, psychological data, and current friendship networks, and the manner in which these various characteristics were linked to their eating preferences. The responses seem to indicate that in these particular groups, food becomes an analogical representation of the self: gourmets try to integrate a large, fluid, cosmopolitan middle-class culture, while vegetarians define themselves negatively and create strong boundaries against the general society.

Historical, sociological, and anthropological investigations have shown the importance of diet as an expression, and even a definition, of self (Back, 1977). The transition from raw to cooked food can be taken as the beginning of human culture and civilization (Levi-Strauss, 1964). The classification of nature into edible and nonedible objects becomes the basis of the world view of a society; the pattern of meals, their preparation, and the combination of preferences for particular items and food taboos are integral parts of the pattern of society. Deviations from an accepted pattern are strongly resisted and felt as unnatural and sinful (Douglas, 1966, 1975).

The matter-of-fact acceptance of cultural patterns of food may account for the fact that there is little emphasis given to the sociology of food as compared to

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Requests for reprints should be sent to Kurt W. Back, Dept. of Sociology, Duke University, Durham, N.C. 27706.

its importance in anthropology and history. Different patterns of food consumption seem conspicuous and peculiar compared to our own if they are encountered in a strange society or when studying another time period. There is an additional assumption—that our own food patterns are rational and are determined mainly by nutritive value and purity. That is, there is a rational standard by which food habits in our society can be measured, using such normative terms as "deficiency" or "improvement" in relation to specific food habits. Anything beyond this is frequently considered capricious, subject to personal taste, and, therefore, sociologically unimportant.

For this reason, eating habits in our society have typically been considered dependent variables or problems to be discussed and remedied. They seem to be examples of such strong cultural traditions that even sociologists can rarely look at them as social phenomena but see them rather as natural and rational standards in the society.

In strongly cohesive, strongly bonded groups, food preference is indeed natural, absorbed with other cultural norms and rarely questioned. But as mobility and contact between different social groups increases, people are bound to see alternative possibilities and perhaps make new choices. However, food is in many ways fundamental, and food habits define social groups even in a pluralistic society.

The use of food as self-expression also has its roots in individual development. Acceptance and rejection of certain foods is a child's way of gaining attention. Eating is frequently the main scene of early problems between parents and children; it is the one field in which the child exercises some control—by refusing to eat—thus food can become the locus of a power struggle. Psychoanalytic theory assigns the first two stages of psychosexual development (oral and anal) to the eating process, and the purely sexual stage (genital) appears only later. In considering the importance of food, we must include psychological traits, which may relate to general sensuality as well as to orality, in addition to social influences. It is, of course, likely that these psychological traits are at least partially determined by early upbringing—that is, social influences.

Before addressing ourselves to the role of diet preference as a social phenomenon, some practical problems have to be solved. We have to find ways to identify group with diet preferences, establish the importance of these diets, find the relevant psychological and social correlates of food preference, and derive measuring systems. The present study is a step in this direction, identifying two special groups to indicate a particular contrast.

Discretionary food preferences are most likely to occur in the mobile, middle-class population. More restricted population groups would not feel the possibility of choice to such a degree and under financial stress might be forced to eat whatever is available at low cost. But the more privileged group is conscious of different lifestyles in food as well as in other areas and also is financially able to concentrate expenditures on special types of food. For the current study, two groups were defined: gourmets and vegetarians.

Gourmets and vegetarians are two self-definitions of food preferences that are found in the same socioeconomic group. Apart from this parallel, there are some contrasts between the two types of preferences. Vegetarians can be defined by an act of rejection; they do not eat certain foods. Gourmets can be defined by an act of preference for certain kinds of food; or perhaps they want certain experiences from their meals. The negative self-definition of the vegetarian makes it easy to construct a boundary around the self—"this is what I do, and this is not me." The positive self-definition of the gourmet gives less of a delineation in principle but would affect behavior and actual choices. One important result of this difference is in the behavior of others and their reaction to the self-image. Prohibitions are regularly cloaked by moral or religious imperatives, whereas preferences are considered to be a matter of taste. One would have to be extremely unfeeling, or at least embarrassed, to offer a steak to a vegetarian, but it would be of minor importance to offer cheeseburgers to a gourmet. As Sartre (1946) has said in his "Portrait of the Anti-Semite," defining oneself negatively is an easy way of obtaining recognition for one's unique self, even from those who do not agree with this orientation. This is why boycotts are so popular. On the other hand, Sartre (1948) used the choice between a cream-puff and an eclair as an example of a nonexistential choice.

METHOD

Basic food habits are interwoven with many other cultural manifestations such that disentangling the importance of food habits becomes prohibitive in a general population. Thus this study contrasts groups that are self-defined by particular food habits—namely, gourmets and vegetarians. This contrast makes it possible to identify differences relating to food preferences and to identify the basis of food styles. It is, of course, not adapted to compare the different influences in food habits and preferences. By contrasting two groups with different but equally prominent food preferences, we can determine the importance of different psychological and social conditions of food preferences.

The literature has shown three general approaches to food preferences, which we define as psychodynamic, social, and motivational. In this study, we examine measures that represent each of these three terms.

Sample

There is no ready source for respondents of different food preferences. They are too rare and too dispersed in the population to be found through any random sampling technique. Therefore we needed a framework in which gourmets and vegetarians could be found with an appreciably greater frequency than in the general population. Such a source was found in subscribers to journals that catered primarily to these groups. Two such journals were identified, and sample

lists of subscribers were obtained from them. Questionnaires were then sent to 1000 subscribers to the gourmet journal and 500 subscribers to the vegetarian journal.

Of the 1000 questionnaires sent to subscribers to the fourmet journal, 37.8% were returned; 42.0% of those sent to the vegetarian-journal subscribers were returned. Of course, not all the subscribers were either vegetarians or gourmets, and answers in the questionnaire had to be used to determine self-definition. One question asked directly for the kind of food the respondents preferred, with the following answers possible: vegetarian, gourmet, "junk food," nutritionally designed, American steak and potato, and health food.

Subscribers to the gourmet journal who checked "gourmet" food were counted as gourmets, and subscribers to the vegetarian journal who checked "vegetarian," or "vegetarian" and "health" were counted as vegetarians. There was almost no overlap of the type in which subscribers of one magazine expressed a preference for the diet specialized in by the other magazine. Of the gourmet-journal subscribers, 70% could be defined as gourmets; 39% of the vegetarian-journal subscribers could be defined as vegetarians.

The technique used does not give a random or representative sample but does give widely dispersed, unbiased (or at least not systematically biased) samples of the two diet groups.

Data

The independent variables represented three possible causes for the selection of food preference style. Gourmets and vegetarians would differ because of social position, because of psychological conditions, and because of personal influence of members of their social setting. The relevant data consisted of two scales of possible psychological factors, questions on social background and social mobility, and network information on actual social contact.

1. *Social background and mobility:*Current social position and mobility were measured in the questionnaire. Questions on current social status included: age, sex, race, size of place of current residence, education, and occupation. In addition, questions were asked about number and distance of moves, from which a geographical mobility score could be derived. Another of these questions asked about estimates of change in lifestyle from that of parents' generation and from that of one's own generation. From these three questions, an index of subjective mobility in lifestyle change was derived.

2. *Psychological data:* The two scales use adaptations of Zuckerman's Sensations Feeling Scale and Wolowitz' Food Preference Scale, measuring oral activity and passivity.

In Zuckerman's (1979) sensation-seeking scale, he defines sensation seeking as "a trait defined by the need for varied, novel, and complex sensation, and

the willingness to take physical and social risks for the sake of such experience [p. 10]." The measure has been tested and analyzed by Zuckerman and consists of pairs of opposing statements, one of which is to be endorsed. In the present study, we used Zuckerman's Form V (1979, pp. 401–402). This consists of four subscales of 10 items each, which had been chosen by factor analysis. Two of the scales, experience seeking and disinhibition, were relevant for our study. Experience seeking is defined as seeking arousal of mind and senses through a nonconforming lifestyle, including agreement with such statements as "I like some of the earthy body smells," and "I have tried marijuana or would like to." Disinhibition is defined as seeking release through drinking, partying, gambling, and sex. It is defined by such ideas as "I like wild, uninhibited parties," and "I enjoy the company of real swingers." Internal reliability is reported (1979, p. 110) as .61 for experience seeking and .74 and .76 (males and females, respectively) for disinhibition. Retest reliability after 3 weeks is shown as .89 for experience seeking and .91 for disinhibition. Five of the items had already been scored in Form IV as a general Sensation Seeking Scale and were also scored for such a scale in this study.

The other measure used was an adaptation of Wolowitz' Food Preference inventory, a measure of oral passivity versus oral active gratifications. This consists of paired items of food, contrasting wet rather than dry, soft rather than hard, bland rather than spiced, sweet rather than sour or bitter and salty, rich rather than thin in consistency, smooth rather than rough, and that which requires sucking and swallowing rather than chewing or biting.

The items differ on one of six characteristics, such as raw versus boiled, spicy versus bland, mashed versus whole. There are 103 pairs in the scale; we selected one-third (35) of the items at random and then discarded some items, including meat, as obviously repugnant to vegetarians. Wolowitz (1964) reported a reliability odd–even coefficient of .78 for the whole scale; the abridged version would leave a somewhat lower reliability.

3. *Current friendship networks:* Importance of agreement and disagreement were measured by two sets of questions: One asked about general preference, "When you meet someone new, how important are the following items in considering that person as a potential friend?"; the second asked for their actual (three closest) friends and the traits the respondents had in common with them. Both sets included items on social background, attitudes, and food interests.

RESULTS

Social Mobility

As expected, the groups did not differ on their current social status. Education, current residence (distribution between rural and urban), sex, and race are similar

TABLE 1
Demographic Conditions

Scale	*Gourmets* (116)[a]	*Vegetarians* (133)[a]	*t*	*p*
Geographic Mobility Scale (mean)	14.80	14.40	.71	—
Lifestyle Change Scale (mean)	8.42	9.23	3.14	<.01
Social Background	*Gourmets*	*Vegetarians*	χ^2	p
Education				
Self:				
No college degree	73	72		
College degree	73	76	—	—
Father:				
No college degree	111	101		
College degree	34	44	1.75	<.25
Size of Place				
Now:				
Metropolitan area	61	55		
Outside metropolitan area	85	91	—	—
Birth:				
Metropolitan area	34	87		
Outside metropolitan area	57	58	8.22	<.005
Generational Change of Occupation				
Same or downward	39	72		
Upward	63	33	19.6	<.001

[a]Number of respondents may vary slightly because of "no answers."

in the two groups; the principal difference is in age, the vegetarians being generally younger. (See Table 1.)

Although diet preference is not related to present social conditions, the members of each group have different earlier experiences. Gourmets are more likely to have come from small towns and rural areas than vegetarians, who come mainly from metropolitan areas. An index that combines different mobility experiences (frequency and distance of moving) also shows increased geographical mobility for the gourmets. This difference does not increase consistently with age but persists if controlled for age; thus the fact that the gourmets are older does not account for their increased social mobility.

By contrast, according to their subjective impressions (as reflected in answers to the questionnaire), the vegetarians have a current lifestyle different from that of their early background. The index that measures changes in lifestyle—combining change experienced since age 16 and change in lifestyle from that of siblings and of parents—showed that vegetarians perceived by far the biggest change.

TABLE 2
Psychological Traits

Scale	*Gourmets* (116)[a]	*Vegetarians* (133)[a]	*t*	*p*
Sensation Seeking Scale				
Disinhibition (10 items)	3.85	3.80	.19	n.s.
Experience Seeking (10 items)	6.20	4.60	6.0	<.001
General Sensation Seeking (5 items)	3.09	2.46	4.30	<.001
Oral Activity Scale (31 items)	17.89	16.95	1.44	<.15

[a]Number of respondents may vary slightly because of "no answers."

Psychological Bases

The measure of sensation seeking showed different contrasts in different subscales. In the two scales that referred to actual search for stimulation, Experience Seeking and General Sensation Seeking, gourmets showed the highest levels, but with only negligible differences (in the reverse direction) in the case of Disinhibitedness (see Table 2). We may conclude that vegetarians keep themselves open to experience and reject social restrictions on their own behavior but have no need for a high level of sensory input, whereas gourmets seem to be motivated by a need for sensory input. This conclusion is supported by the results of the oral activity scale, where we again find the gourmets scoring higher. Sensory stimulation and oral activity have been found to be correlated in earlier studies.

Friendship Choices

The first question we may ask is to what extent do the different groups rely on common food habits in choosing their associates? Here we find an interesting contrast. If we ask whether our respondent would select his friends according to common food habits, the vegetarians are clearly more interested in agreement with their friends in this hypothetical case. (See Table 3.) If we ask, however, about actual friends (whether they have similar food habits), we find that gourmets are more likely to associate with people of their own kind. Vegetarians, in their commitment to a distinct self, feel themselves to be isolated in their own group, more than they are in reality; gourmets have no strong self-image setting them apart, but in fact they seem to be thrown together with similar people. A similar contrast occurs in questions about attitudes. Vegetarians think they want to associate with people of similar beliefs more than do gourmets; however, the responses show little difference between the two groups on the extent to which

TABLE 3
Hypothetical and Real Friendship Choices

Friendship Choices *Potential Friends*	*Gourmets*	*Vegetarians*	*t*	*p*
	(116)[a]	(133)[a]		
(High score means different)				
Social background	5.79	6.06	1.88	<.07
Beliefs	6.91	6.24	4.40	<.001
Food interest	2.63	2.51	1.02	<.30
Actual Friends				
(High score means same)				
Social background	4.24	3.64	2.14	<.05
Attitudes	4.19	4.31	.67	—
Diet	3.36	2.19	5.75	<.001

[a]Number of respondents may vary slightly because of "no answers."

they are actually in agreement with the attitudes of their current friends—if anything, the gourmets are more similar in beliefs to their friends than are the vegetarians. Only for one set of criteria are the hypothetical and real friends related consistently by the two groups: gourmets are more likely to say that they would select their friends according to social background, and they do so.

DISCUSSION

Let us first contrast the two types of food preferences as social groups. Both are middle-class, according to education and social position. However, the groumets have achieved this position through advancing to higher educational and occupational status than their parents and have participated in the general urbanization process of upward social mobility. They are conscious of their social status, and they are now ready to enjoy the fruits of their success. By contrast, vegetarians are more likely to come from an already successful, metropolitan background. They give the impression of trying to reject their background in order to live for an ideal and to be less concerned with material success. They do not accept restrictions and seek to associate with like-minded individuals, although they are forced to accept the reality of a world where people like themselves are scarce.

We can now look at the way in which food preference is an indication of how social experiences relate to definition of self. Vegetarians define themselves by emphasizing what they do not do; in this way, they tend to stress their dissimilarity from other people. They show this separation in ideological preferences, preferences for association with like-minded people, and rejection of socially imposed inhibitions, all of which seem to form a strong boundary around the self. The

separation and differences from other people correspond to the background the vegetarians reject. Gourmets by contrast define their food preferences as well as their self-identification positively. They accept a high level of sensuality and oral activity and translate this into their eating behavior; their associates are similar to them in social background (a social segregation that they accept) and are interested in the same style of eating, although this is not stated as a principle. Finally, although they have travelled a longer distance, physically as well as socially, from their origins than have the vegetarians, gourmets felt that they have stayed closer to the lifestyle of their background.

In their choice of food preferences, both groups give cues on their self-image. Assuming distinct, minority styles of food interest, the participants in this study show the importance of nutrition for representing themselves to themselves and to others. Thus, at least in these groups, food preferences become analogical representations of the self: the gourmets try to integrate a large, fluid, cosmopolitan middle-class culture, and the vegetarians define themselves negatively and create strong boundaries against the general society.

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