

I'll eat what she's eating — can the university student experience influence eating behaviours?

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The pathway to university

If I asked you to draw your food habits over your lifetime as a pathway what would it look like? Would it be a straight line, or perhaps have more of a meandering appearance? This research looks at food habits like a pathway through life, or the Food Life Course, concentrating on how food habits are formed and how subsequently these habits are re-fashioned due to a change in circumstances. We develop patterns of behaviour around food in childhood largely as a result of familial influences and these behaviours evolve as an individual moves through different life stages. However, the impact of life events on an individual's food choices can vary depending on social and personal influences and the eating environment itself.

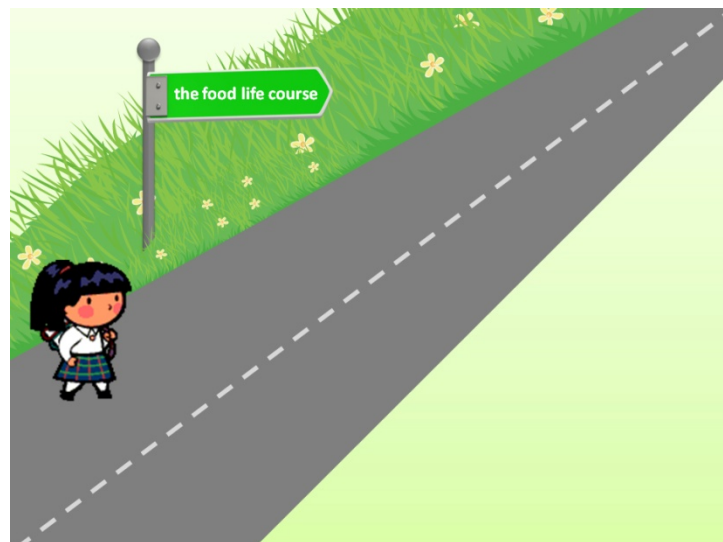


Figure 1: The Food Life Course. Female students' eating behaviours may meander during the transition to university

So, for example, what would happen if I took an individual out of the routine of their family environment and thrust them into a totally new environment with completely different influences? Influences like new social networks and that of a new social institution. That is exactly what happens when an adolescent starts University. I am specifically going to

concentrate on female students and how social and personal factors interact to influence individual behavioural patterns. I am focussing on what is called the 'transition to university' and the effect (if any) this has on the eating behaviours of young women. Eating behaviours of these young women can be quite complex, with femininity and beauty ideals coming to the fore. Norms and ideals in relation to food can become rooted in a value system that communicates thin as the ideal of beauty and perfection. The result can be a refashioning of food habits where peer influences become the dominant role in relation to these choices. To the point of entering University a food pathway may be relatively straight, but due to the transition, food choices may go into flux and may not stabilise until they finish university. However, the impact of this transition can be long-term; in this case previous eating patterns are never returned to.

Motivations for food choice

Within this new context I am interested in the extent to which peer influences impact on a female's food choice or, to put it another way, the degree of personal choice a female student feels she has over her choices. If we can imagine a group of girls sitting in the university canteen each one in turn makes her lunch choice, until we come to one girl in particular, let's call her Maeve. Now let me give you some background on Maeve. She chooses to play music and sport because she finds them fulfilling and enjoyable so overall Maeve exerts free choice over her life domains. However, in certain contexts, like university, peers can have a substantial impact on Maeve's motivations or intentions, especially in the realm of food choice and consumption. Maeve may feel she has personal choice over many areas in her life or is intrinsically motivated, but the presence of peers in this particularly context, food choice, can cause her to become extrinsically motivated or controlled by others. What is interesting is that Maeve could personally be a source of her own external control as a result of perceptions she has about ideals and values in relation to food.

Extrinsic motivation or personal choice?

The level of external control that Maeve feels over her behaviours can vary depending on whether she feels a sense of ownership over the behaviour or if she internalises the behaviour. Different types of motivation can be described based on the degree that Maeve attempts to incorporate the behaviour into her own personally held norms and values. This can be viewed as a continuum, where the motivation to engage in a behaviour can be because of a controlling orientation or a sense of choice. If Maeve pursues an activity out of interest and enjoyment she is internally motivated to engage in the behaviour thus it reflects intrinsic motivation. Extrinsic motivation is where engaging in the behaviour is

done for a reward or social recognition and does not emanate from the self. So, Maeve regulates her eating behaviours because of pressure from her friends. Extrinsic motivation can be broken down into four behavioural regulations which vary depending on the degree of internalisation. In order to explain this effectively, let us now go back to the group of friends sitting in the university canteen making their food choices. Everyone has made their choice except Maeve. As Maeve stands about to make her choice, the following options reflect why she could make this choice:

- Option 1: Maeve chooses a salad with no dressing because she gets pleasure from that type of food and enjoys how it tastes — *Maeve is intrinsically motivated toward the behaviour*
- Option 2: Maeve chooses a salad with no dressing because of the presence of others — *Maeve is externally regulated to perform the behaviour and feels she has no volition*
- Option 3: Maeve chooses a salad with no dressing because she would feel ashamed if she ate something else — *This is regulation through introjection, where Maeve feels she has to maintain self-worth*
- Option 4: Maeve chooses a salad with no dressing because she feels it is a good thing in order to feel good about herself — *This is regulation through identification, where eating this way is becoming personally important*
- Option 5: Maeve will choose a salad with no dressing because she feels energised after eating this food — *This is regulation through integration and is the most autonomous kind of extrinsic motivation, but the goal Maeve is trying to achieve is still external from the self*

Moving down through Maeve's lunch choices, we can see that the degree of internalisation or the degree that Maeve is accepting the behaviours as her own is increasing; however, all the options represent extrinsic motivation. Maeve may be beginning to accept these behaviours as her own but they did not originate within the self but as a result of peer influences around food. In order to increase intrinsic motivation an individual must feel: they have choice over their behaviours — autonomy; feel connected to other people and socially valued — relatedness; and feel they can master the behaviour — competence. Behaviours that are intrinsically motivated provide well-being and are more likely to be continued throughout the individual's life. They follow choices that emanate within the self and what they believe to be true. Externally motivated behaviours can lead to lower self-esteem and can cause female students to be more susceptible to social pressures about thinness. However, if a female student is thrust into a controlling environment, this can in time cause her to change her eating habits to fit the external controls she is faced with. Dealing with such external forces can cause her to develop strategies in certain eating situations that can lead to unhealthy patterns of behaviour. Such strategies can include compensatory behaviours, where a female student may eat less after bingeing

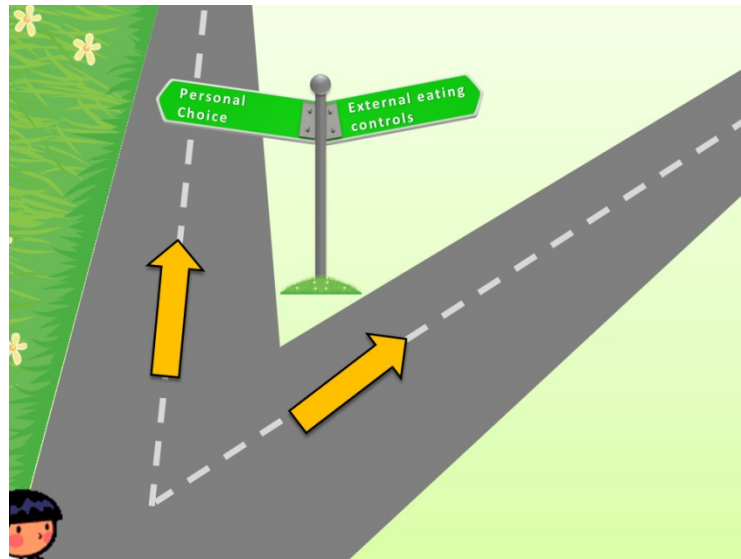


Figure 2: The motivations behind food choice — will a student be externally controlled?

during occasions (e.g., following alcohol consumption) by skipping meals in order to offset calorie intake.

So what determines Maeve's choices and what are the external forces acting upon her? She freely exerts choice in other domains of her life like music and sport but she is unable to spread this choice to her food behaviours. There is a knowledge gap concerning the eating behaviours of Irish female students and, in particular, the impact social influences can have on these behaviours. Female university students are particularly vulnerable to social pressures associated with physical appearance, with friends often playing a dominant role in the development of unhealthy eating behaviours. Those who perceive pressure from peers are often more likely to engage in unhealthy patterns in order to live up to unrealistic ideals. Social adjustment can be very important in university providing a powerful motivation to conform to these ideals or even internalise the belief that thin equates beauty, perfection and popularity. Behaviours established during this transition could potentially create a life-long concern with body image and associated health problems.

Methodology

With this research, I hope to contribute to the knowledge concerning the eating patterns of young women but go further by specifying the impact social influences can have on eating behaviours during the transition to university. On entry to university such changes to food choice and consumption can be instantaneous so the research will start this September. First year students, 300 in total, from three universities, University College Cork, National University of Ireland Galway and Dublin City University will be administered with a questionnaire concerning their food choice consumption patterns and their motivations

behind food choice at Time 1 (September 2011). The same students will be administered the same questionnaire at Time 2 (April 2012). Comparisons between the two sets of results will show (if any) changes to both food consumption and the motivations behind food choice. At both times, height and weight measurements will also be taken to compare any differences. The same students will be administered a slightly augmented questionnaire in second year to again further assess any differences in food choice as a result of the transition to university.

Conclusion

Students enter university with established eating behaviours and they should be able to continue to uphold their own beliefs in relation to food. Any information received by external forces such as friends that may differ from these beliefs should be disregarded in favour of personal choice. A strategy needs to be developed to help these young women deal with social pressures but how can we implement such a strategy if we do not understand the external forces facing these students in relation to their food choices? I hope to delve deeper into the social conditions in which these young women now make their food choices and dare to ask if eating and ever be as individual as other activities.

Ciana Aspell is a student of Food Business and Development under the supervision of Dr. Mary McCarthy and Dr. Sinead McCarthy