

A rapid evidence review of the Psychology of Food Choice

Research programme: Behaviour and perception

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Background

This literature review aimed to provide insight into the situational, social, emotional and psychological roles of food and how variation among them influence buying and eating decisions.

The report aims to respond to the following questions:

- What are the key psychological processes that we should consider when thinking about our food choices?
- What characteristics of a person, place or product can influence these processes?
- What approaches to influence food choice have been tried and found effective – and what is the psychology behind them?
- Which approaches to promoting positive food choices show the greatest promise? ‘Positive choices’ in this case infer those leading to better health or sustainability.
- How have inequalities been incorporated into research, and where is greater consideration needed?

A scoping review of systematic reviews between 2016 and 2021 was conducted, with 39 reviews retrieved and used as primary evidence on which this report is based.

Results

What works

- People usually only make conscious, or deliberate, choices when they have the opportunity to do so, a positive attitude towards the outcome and are motivated to put effort into acting in line with these attitudes.
- We can help people who are already motivated to turn their intentions into action through providing them with simple tools aimed at helping them to achieve their goals and track their progress.
- Evidence is available as to which are the more effective ways providing this support and which can be delivered in person or online. In particular, the use of “if-then” plans may help to cement new behaviours into established habits.
- Approaches that operate at a less conscious level, for example through habit or ‘nudging’, do not rely on attitudes or motivation to influence behaviour.
- Working with the gatekeepers (i.e., shops, cafes, restaurants) of the places where food is accessed will be pivotal to greater implementation of choice architecture.
- Increasing the visibility of people making positive (healthy or sustainable) food choices will help others to do the same.

- Increased visibility may help to shift what people consider to be normal (influencing social norms), which can have a strong influence on their behaviour.
- Modelling how positive choices fit into the lives of people across different sociodemographic groups is important to ensure an inclusive approach.

What works for whom

- Psychological approaches to promoting positive food choices are important but do not work equally across all social groups. It is therefore important to investigate and attempt to prevent the unintended consequences of policies influencing food choice, such as endorsing stigma and widening inequalities.

What next

- Most of the existing research is on individual level processes and exploring relatively localised and minor environmental restructuring effects. More research is needed that draws on our understanding of how broad social and cultural effects on behaviour work.
- More research is also needed to explore how we can shift social practices, within the context of the systems wide approach, to promote health and sustainability.
- Ultimately, conditions in which people feel that positive food choices are normal and supported by both others and their environment, rather than something requiring vigilance and hard work, will help positive choices to become less effortful and more sustainable.

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