Perceived eating norms and children's eating behaviour: An informational social influence account

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**A B S T R A C T**

There is initial evidence that beliefs about the eating behaviour of others (perceived eating norms) can influence children's vegetable consumption, but little research has examined the mechanisms explaining this effect. In two studies we aimed to replicate the effect that perceived eating norms have on children's vegetable consumption, and to explore mechanisms which may underlie the influence of perceived eating norms on children's vegetable consumption. Study 1 investigated whether children follow perceived eating norms due to a desire to maintain personal feelings of social acceptance. Study 2 investigated whether perceived eating norms influence eating behaviour because eating norms provide information which can remove uncertainty about how to behave. Across both studies children were exposed to vegetable consumption information of other children and their vegetable consumption was examined. In both studies children were influenced by perceived eating norms, eating more when led to believe others had eaten a large amount compared to when led to believe others had eaten no vegetables. In Study 1, children were influenced by a perceived eating norm regardless of whether they felt sure or unsure that other children accepted them. In Study 2, children were most influenced by a perceived eating norm if they were eating in a novel context in which it may have been uncertain how to behave, as opposed to an eating context that children had already encountered. Perceived eating norms may influence children's eating behaviour by removing uncertainty about how to behave, otherwise known as informational social influence.

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1. Introduction

A substantial body of literature suggests that eating behaviour can be socially influenced. People have been shown to adapt their eating behaviour to that of a present dining companion (Bevelander, Anschütz, & Engels, 2012; Hermans, Larsen, Herman, & Engels, 2009; Robinson, Blissett, & Higgs, 2013). Moreover, beliefs about the eating behaviour of others, otherwise known as perceived eating norms, have been consistently shown to influence eating behaviour in laboratory studies (Pliner & Mann, 2004; Robinson, 2015; Sharps & Robinson, 2015). For example, a number of studies showed that people eat more when exposed to information that suggests other people have eaten a large amount of food, compared to when exposed to information that suggests other people have eaten a small amount (Pliner & Mann, 2004; Robinson, 2015; Robinson et al., 2013; Robinson, Thomas, Aveyard, & Higgs, 2014b).

The mechanisms that explain why perceived eating norms influence behaviour have received less attention. One explanation is that perceived eating norms may act as a form of normative social influence (Deutsch & Gerard, 1955), whereby people may copy the behaviour of others when they are concerned with feeling socially accepted or establishing a relationship with the source of the influence (Cialdini & Goldstein, 2004; Cialdini & Trost, 1998; Deutsch & Gerard, 1955). Humans have a desire to be liked by others and belong (Baumeister & Leary, 1995), and there is evidence that normative social influence may be a possible explanation for why people adjust their own food intake to the intake of a present peer (Hermans, Engels, Larsen, & Herman, 2009; Robinson, Tobias, Shaw, Freeman, & Higgs, 2011). For example, Hermans, Engels, et al. (2009) found that participants only imitated the eating behaviour of a confederate when the confederate behaved in a ‘cold’ manner towards them, suggesting that participants may have imitated eating behaviour in order to persuade the confederate to accept them. In another study, Robinson et al. (2011) found that when
participants were primed to feel socially accepted, they were less likely to match the intake of a confederate. This research linking normative explanations to social imitation of eating has predominately focused on experimental paradigms which involve people eating together, however, there is also evidence that eating behaviour may be socially influenced due to a desire to ‘fit in’ even when peers are not present (Cruwys et al., 2012; Guendelman, Cheryan, & Monin, 2011). For example, in one study (Cruwys et al., 2012) University students encountered a confederate, and were exposed to the popcorn intake of the confederate before being left alone to eat popcorn. Cruwys et al. (2012) found that the participants only adjusted their intake based on what they believed the confederate had eaten when they were led to believe that the confederate was from the same University as them (Cruwys et al., 2012). In addition, in two studies (Guendelman et al., 2011) Asian American participants were more likely to report prototypical American food as their favourite, and ordered and ate more American dishes after their American identity was challenged compared to when their identity was not challenged. Thus, these studies indicate that social factors may influence eating as a result of a desire to ‘fit in’. However, little other research has examined whether normative social influence may be a potential mechanism underlying the influence that perceived eating norms have on eating behaviour. Although research has shown that perceived eating norms influence eating behaviour (Pliner & Mann, 2004; Robinson, 2015; Robinson et al., 2013; Robinson et al., 2014b; Roth, Herman, Policy, & Pliner, 2001), at present we do not know whether people are influenced by perceived eating norms due to people wanting to ‘fit in’ and feel accepted, but it is a plausible explanation which warrants testing.

An alternative explanation to a normative account of social influence is that perceived eating norms may act as a form of informational social influence (Deutsch & Gerard, 1955). According to Cialdini and Trost (1998) people are often uncertain about how to behave in a situation, and other people’s behaviour may act as a guide to determine the most appropriate course of action. Therefore, perceived eating norms which provide information about the eating behaviour of others may indicate the correct way to behave in a situation, e.g. ‘if a lot of people are doing this, it’s probably a wise thing to do’ (Cialdini, 2007). Thus, conformity to the norm may be a way of reducing uncertainty in a situation, rather than other motives such as social acceptance or wanting to ‘fit in’ (Cialdini & Goldstein, 2004; Deutsch & Gerard, 1955). As discussed, adults have been shown to be influenced by perceived eating norms (Pliner & Mann, 2004; Robinson, 2015; Robinson et al., 2013; Robinson et al., 2014b; Roth et al., 2001). Within these studies participants were typically exposed to perceived eating norms that suggested how others behaved in the same context (i.e. other participants in this study ate this amount of food) during a single experimental session. Since the research environment is likely to be novel and unfamiliar to the participants, it is feasible that perceived eating norms have a consistent effect on behaviour in these paradigms because they inform participants about the correct way to behave in the novel and unfamiliar eating context participants find themselves in. Therefore, it is not clear whether people are strongly influenced by perceived eating norms within these studies because the eating context may be unfamiliar and novel, or whether people would also be influenced by perceived eating norms if they have eaten in that context previously. If an informational social influence-based account of perceived eating norms is correct, then we would hypothesise that people would be most influenced by perceived eating norms when they find themselves in a novel context vs. a context they have previously eaten in. This is because people would be more uncertain about how to behave ‘or’ act’ in a novel context, as opposed to a context that a person has previously eaten in. Thus, understanding whether perceived eating norms influence behaviour to a greater extent in novel and unfamiliar contexts, as opposed to a familiar eating context is one approach by which to test an informational social influence account.

Although there is now reliable evidence that perceived eating norms influence eating behaviour in adults (Robinson et al., 2014b), less research has examined this in children (Sharps & Robinson, 2015). In one study, Sharps and Robinson (2015) exposed children to a perceived eating norm that outlined the vegetable intake of previous (fictitious) children in that study. Consistent with the adult literature, the children were influenced by the perceived eating norm, eating more when exposed to information suggesting that previous children had eaten a large amount, compared to when exposed to information suggesting that previous children had eaten no vegetables. As this is the only study to our knowledge which has directly investigated the influence of perceived eating norms on children’s eating behaviour, further research is needed to replicate this effect. Furthermore, although research has started to examine evidence for mechanisms underlying social influences on eating behaviour in adults (Hermans, Engels, et al., 2009; Robinson et al., 2011), less research has examined evidence for the mechanisms underlying the influence of perceived eating norms on children’s eating behaviour.

The present research had two aims: Our first aim was to replicate the effect that perceived eating norms have on children’s vegetable consumption (Sharps & Robinson, 2015). Our second aim was to examine evidence for possible mechanisms underlying the influence of perceived eating norms in children. In Study 1 we examined whether perceived eating norms may act as a form of normative social influence, whereby, children may be motivated to conform to a perceived eating norm in order to maintain personal feelings of social acceptance and ‘fit in’. In Study 2 we examined whether perceived eating norms may act as a form of informational social influence, by shaping eating behaviour when there is uncertainty about how to behave.

2. Study 1

2.1. Method

2.1.1. Participants

100 children (53% females, 88% normal-weight) aged 6–11 years old (9.6 years, SD = 1.5) were recruited from two Primary schools in North-West England. Children were led to believe that the study was looking at how children play games. In recent work, we examined the effect of perceived eating norms on children’s vegetable consumption and in this study we observed a statistically large effect (Sharps & Robinson, 2015). Therefore, sample sizes of 25 children per condition provided adequate statistical power to detect similar sized main effects of perceived eating norms in the present studies. Study 1 and 2 were approved by the University of Liverpool Research Ethics Committee. Fully-informed consent was provided and children with allergies or a history of allergies were unable to participate in both studies.

2.1.2. Study overview

Children attended a single experimental session at a primary school. Children were either primed with feelings of peer acceptance, or with feelings of ambiguity about their peer acceptance. Next, children were exposed to information that indicated the vegetable consumption of previous (fictitious) children in the study (perceived eating norm). Dependent on condition, children either saw that previous children had eaten a large amount of vegetables, or no vegetables. All children were provided with a bowl of vegetables (carrots), and were left for 7 min to consume as much or as
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