

# Eating food we dislike? Situations and reasons for eating distasteful food against personal preferences

Hosting homo cooperativus at your table

Thomas Schröder, Gesa Schönberger, Heidelberg

## Summary

People eat food even if they dislike its taste. Based on individual cases, this study presents ways in which individuals adapt their eating behavior according to parameters of the eating situation. Individual justifications to eat against their food preferences include:

- not to harm one's reputation,
- wish to comply with social norms (e.g. rules of courtesy and propriety),
- wish for harmony and respect in social relationships,
- to set children an example when eating,
- lack of provision,
- wished-for effect on health,
- economic forces.

**Keywords:** taste preference, homo cooperativus, eating situation, social determinants, eating behavior

of a trend to compulsive, almost enforced pleasure in public depiction, the Dr. Rainer Wild Foundation has conducted a survey in 2013 in search for answers to why individuals choose to eat food contrary to their personal preferences.

From a sociologic point of view, it is neither novel nor surprising to acknowledge that individuals occasionally consume foods albeit flavor being the prime trigger. BOURDIEU'S concept of symbolic consumption [1, 2] invites to interpret eating behavior beyond scientific theories of sensory preference and nutritional physiology, and provides profound explanation. According to BOURDIEU, foods are not only consumed for flavor and sensory experience. Food choice and consumption also follow symbolic meaning in order to signify particular social status within a stratified social order [1, 3], or group, or community belonging [4]. For example, champagne and caviar represent economic success; regional foods are symbolic indicators of personal identity and the individual's provenance, or cultural belonging [5, 6].

Aside the established BOURDIEUSIAN explanations of food consumption, this article draws on the behavioral economics concept of *homo cooperativus* [7] aiming to provide and introduce a novel theoretical foundation in order to explain a particular eating behavior: 'eating against one's

## Introduction

Media and nutrition experts tend to draw a picture of a consumer with primarily one intention to eat, which is the enhancement and maximization of pleasure. Not much academic interest has been paid yet to the question of how consumers deal with foods which explicitly do not appeal to their taste preference. From an academic point of view, it is not proven which influence the eating situation has on an individual's decision to eat against its personal taste preferences. There are no studies on individual justifications for this particular behavior. In light

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taste preference'. Other than *homo economicus*, the concept of *homo cooperativus* does not exclusively rely on the principle of individual utility maximization to explain (economic) action. However, utility maximization is only one driver amongst many to cause *homo cooperativus'* action. *Homo cooperativus* may well take decisions on the basis of self-interest and purposive rationality; yet helpfulness, cooperativeness, and idealism (i.e. being fair and responsible) may as well account for *homo cooperativus'* behaviors, shaping decisions, and actions. This resonates with theories of choice, according to which individuals do not – or hardly ever – decide on the basis of singular rationales. Yet real life decision making involves a process of considering and juxtaposing several rationales simultaneously which may interfere with, or contradict each other.

## Methods

### Data collection

In April 2013, trained interviewers from the Heidelberg Market Research Institute GIM conducted 26 guided interviews (of about 1.5 hours each) on behalf of the Dr. Rainer Wild Foundation. Individuals were prompted to describe their actions in situations in which they disliked the foods or dishes they ate.<sup>1</sup> In addition, interviewees were prompted to reflect upon their eating behavior in these cases and – if possible – explain why they ate against their preference.

### Sample

The non-representative sample consisted of 12 men and 14 women (25–59 years of age) from the Rhine-Neckar District. The selection was based on a quota matrix, in order to obtain a heterogeneous study group. The heterogeneity within the sample led to notable variety with regard to

e.g. household size, income, cooking behavior, and practices of food purchasing and eating outside people's homes. The study excluded individuals who were limited to special diet, such as pregnant women, people with disease related restrictions or food intolerance, and individuals with diagnosed eating disorders.

### Analysis

The analysis was based on GLASER and STRAUSS'S [8, 9] method of iteration between literature and empirical material. The interviews were transcribed verbatim. The transcripts were coded and categorized in order to develop some initial hypotheses. The categories were developed and extended both on the basis of primary interview data and a single group discussion previous to the actual data collection and on the basis of a literature review as performed continuously alongside with the analysis. The analysis was done with the MAXQDA software for coding and category development.

### Findings

In the course of the data analysis it turned out that some of the interviewees' justifications for their eating behavior highlighted the particular relevance of the eating situation for the interviewees' decision to eat. In retrospective, many interviewees indicated that in a different situation their decision might have differed. As a consequence, the analytical focus was directed on the comprehension of eating situations in order to explain eating behavior. The findings are presented in two steps: First, according to the interviewees' utterances, individual justifications for eating against personal taste preferences are highlighted in relation to particular eating situations (if possible) (♦ Figure 1). For this purpose the interviewees' most remarkable descriptions i.e. interview quotes were compiled, adding

up to a multifaceted picture that allows deducing from situation to eating behavior. This, in a second step, is followed by a systematic presentation of eating situations according to both data and literature.

### Individual justifications for eating behavior

Several interviewees described situations in which they ate together with – and hosted by – friends or family members in domestic settings i.e. private homes as occasions to eat food against their taste preference. They referred to the wish to comply with common rules of courtesy and propriety. These justifications refer to implicit social norms, as shown in the following quotes<sup>2</sup>:

*"I wouldn't do it in the presence of the others. Out of politeness, because I like him, and I don't want to offend him."* (Int. 2)

*"Yes, also because I'm feeling embarrassed or because I respect the food or the people in a restaurant."* (Int. 13)

In these situations, the interviewees wished to express their appreciation for the others' time, financial effort, and sometimes emotional effort. Some interviewees used terms such as "harmony" and "respect". Another reason for some interview partners to eat was the improvement or maintenance of social and interpersonal relationships, as the following quotes exemplify:

*"I didn't want to offend her. [...] She had made such a big effort. [...] I didn't want to say, 'I won't eat that, it doesn't taste good'."* (Int. 8)

*"And not to offend my friend when she had cooked something, when it was*

<sup>1</sup> It was up to each individual to judge the meaning of the phrases "tastes good" or "does not taste good"

<sup>2</sup> The original German quotes are printed in the German publication of this article: ■■■ Ernährungs Umschau 62(7): 114–119

clear to me that she spend a lot of time and effort." (Int. 7)

The following quote fits the context in a special way, as the interviewee speaks about an emerging love relationship:

*"If you are invited by a woman you really like and you think the relationship might emerge, you simply eat and say that it was good, even if it wasn't."* (Int. 1)

Some interviewees expressed their wish to be a role model for others, for example for children, and therefore ate food considered as good or health they wouldn't fancy. (It is unclear for the following example whether it is an eating situation at home, or out, or both.)

*"He only wanted chips and schnitzel. I don't like tomatoes and but I did eat them to set an example. I was sure he would like them and he did in fact."* (Int. 1)

This justification refers to the other's health and health maintenance, and (especially children's) taste development – in as much as parents intend being a role model. It is likely to assume that in this particular case the other's well-being is the interviewee's key trigger for the decision to eat against her or his taste preference.

Some interviewees explained their eating behavior with the wish not to restrict themselves in their social activities, or the wish not to be seen in a negative way by others.

*"This may be the case when I visit friends, whenever I don't cook myself. But that would restrict me too much. I couldn't go out any longer that way."* (Int. 17)

*"It's certainly true that you don't want to make a poor impression by being a [...] negative or critical eater [...]. I eat it to avoid marching a different drummer [...], so that people don't think that I'm a complainer".* (Int. 6)

*"So you'd be a spoilsport, just because the bratwurst [fried sausage] don't suit you? You wouldn't do that! [...]*

*If your belly is full [...] your mood is always better"* (Int. 5)

The above quotes stand for eating situations in which actors eat in order to maintain or improve their social reputation or, in other words, where actors see their reputation at risk in case they would refuse to eat. The above also stands for situations in which actors would not volunteer compromising on social relations at the benefit of tasty foods. Harmony amongst friends i.e. within groups weights heavier in the given cases.

In such situations, the communal meal has socializing functions [3]. The quality of social relations appears to be crucial to the decision whether to eat or not. There is a distinction between eating behavior with familiar persons (friends, family etc.), where the relationship is informal and symmetrical, and eating with unfamiliar persons, where the relationship is asymmetrical, and perhaps unilaterally dependent.

The examples so far (symmetrical social relations) display the individual wish for belonging (e.g. to a group of friends), cooperation, and harmony. The following examples stand for asymmetrical social relations. As it shows, the interviewees in these cases tend to be afraid of risking or compromising on their social reputation, and worry about long-term negative consequences in case they would refuse to eat (up). In these situations, the interviewees described themselves as guests:

*"The reason that I do eat [...] is that the host is sitting there [...]. I mean the management and the director who is the host [...]. I'm feeling obliged not to make any problems."* (Int. 23)

*"It then depends [...] on the group of people – if they are really very important and I depend on them in some way or another. [...] But if it was some relatives or a bunch of friends [...], I'd say that I won't eat that. [...] I don't like it."* (Int. 6)

*"Of course there are business dinners such as [...] Christmas dinner or the summer party, when we are all to-*

*gether and sit at the same table. You then really want to make a good impression and not to leave things on your plate like a little child."* (Int. 13)

Regardless of the personal relation and regardless of familiarity or interdependencies with the other – the social role may influence someone's eating behavior in a particular situation: Being guest (invited by someone else) may increase the individual readiness to eat.

The following examples stand for individual justifications which are independent of the eating situation. They are overarching in the sense that they might count (from the individual point of view) in almost every situation. According to some of the interviewees this will be the case, if they (the person eating) face a lack of alternatives while feeling hungry:

*"I was out recently, and there was nothing else than a rissole bun. The bun was as hard as stone and the rissole wasn't good either. But I knew that was probably all that I could get that day. So I ate it."* (Int. 18)

*"Well if you are somewhere and there is only [...] bratwurst [fried sausage] [...] and you don't want fried sausages. You have a really simple choice. Either you don't eat sausages and you are still hungry, or you eat the sausages and you satisfy your hunger for the moment. It's that simple [...] In that case, I would eat a fried sausage."* (Int. 5)

Across the interviews, there were cases where individuals ate food for its (specific or anticipated) dietary, health or performance-enhancing effects, as the following examples show:

*"Sometimes it was really tasteless. But then I told myself that it was still healthy. [...] You see, I have a conversion table in my mind to convert everything to calories. [...] That's the only reason I have to eat something I don't like."* (Int. 20)

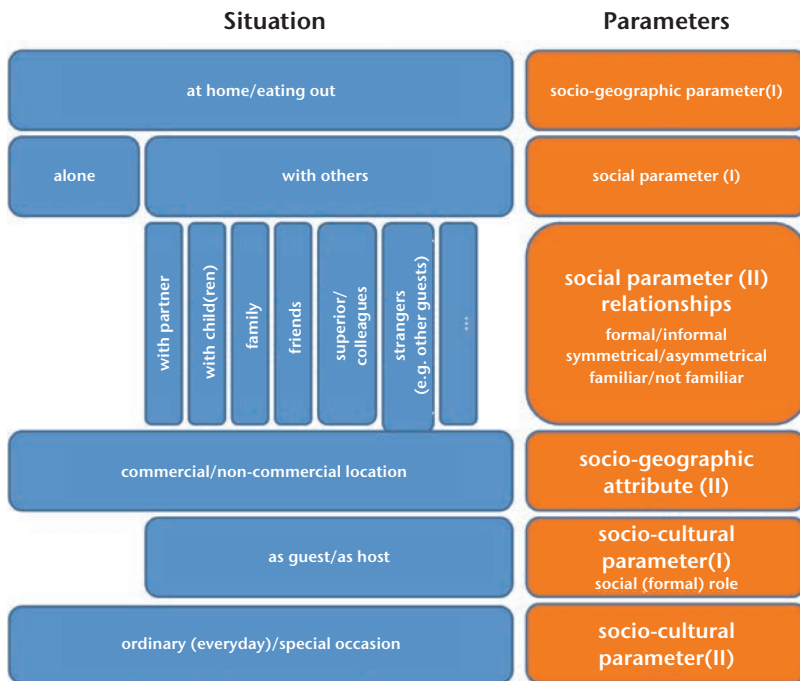


Fig. 1: Eating situations and parameters [own illustration]

“Well, from a health perspective, if you say I want to eat healthier and I want to lose some weight perhaps I am more likely to eat things that don’t taste good. [...] and that’s why I eat things that do not taste good. [...] That’s why I do eat things that I don’t like really, just because it seems reasonable to me. I have to eat healthier food. I have to watch out for the calories, eat in a balanced way, a bit of everything and not too much of a single thing.” (Int. 13)

Foods have economic value, so it is hardly surprising that the economic dimension plays a role for some interviewee’s decision to eat.

“You can eat it, but it’s not my taste. Then it depends on the situation I’m in. [...] For example, if I’m in a restaurant and I’ve ordered something and it doesn’t taste as I anticipated, I will never get them to throw it all out. [...] I will eat it then, [...] I have to pay for it and if I have to pay, I should eat it then.” (Int. 3)

However, the economic dimension can also unfold into an inverted scenario, for example where someone has paid an all-inclusive price

for a meal, or a holiday trip including free buffets.

“I think that when you are on holiday [...], you are tempted to waste more [food] than otherwise, because you think ‘this is my holiday and I will enjoy myself’. [...] Especially when you’re on all-inclusive holidays, you have already paid. You can eat as little or as much as you want, yet you pay the same.” (Int. 13)

The above examples have been selected in order to demonstrate singular justifications for individual behavior. Yet, throughout the interviews, interviewees often provide multiple justifications to explain why they would eat against their personal taste preference:

Interviewer: “What is the most frequent reason for you to eat something that you don’t like?”

Interviewee: “Hunger, followed by all other.”

Interviewer: “What comes next?”

Interviewee: “Hunger, stress. And then (...) [eating situations, ed.] with friends. Distraction and boredom.” (Int. 21)

This quote indicates the existence of a hierarchic order among justifications.

## Eating situations

In order to systematize eating situations we chose the term ‘configuration’: Thus, a situation is configured by different parameters, and the combination of parameters (♦ Figure 1). The parameters were either generated on the basis of the empirical findings, or taken from the literature: WARDE and MARTENS distinguish everyday eating situations ‘out of the ordinary’ – both at home and out; and ‘special occasions’ to eat [10]. This distinction was adapted in the present study, and extended inductively on the grounds of the empirical findings in order to create a differentiated spectrum of eating situations.

We introduced the attributes ‘commercial/non-commercial location’ (to perform practices of eating) to take into account that particular rules of conduct and courtesy apply when eating in out e.g. in a restaurant or public place [11, 12]. If eating with others, one would eat together with partners, children, family members, friends, colleagues, superiors, or unknown people. While eating, as mentioned above, the quality of the social relation plays a crucial role for the individual eating behavior. When eating at home, eating behavior depends on whether someone is alone or together with others. Eating with others may take place in various family constellations (e.g. with partner, with children, with partner and children), or in the role as a host (others will be involved then obviously). Here, again, the quality of the social i.e. inter-personal relations plays a crucial role.

Parameter ‘couplets’ are constructed in binary ways, and understood as mutually exclusive. You either eat out, or at home; either with others,



- Compliance with social norms (rules of courtesy and propriety)
- A wish not to make an unpleasant impression when eating with others, and not to harm one's reputation
- A wish for harmony and respect in social relationships
- Intention to set an example to others (particularly children) when eating
- Lack of food provision (availability)
- Economic forces
- A wished-for effect on body and mind (anticipated dietetic effects, health effects, or performance-enhancing effects)
- The wish not to be restricted by one's personal taste preferences in the company of others

Overview 1: Justifications provided by interviewees (n = 26) for eating food they dislike

or alone; you are either host, or guest. All parameters can be combined with the couplet 'out of the ordinary'/'special occasion'.

## Discussion

Individual justifications for eating disliked food vary. The statements given by the interviewees indicate that individuals adapt their eating behavior to the situation in which they eat on the basis of social, socio-geographic, and socio-cultural parameters. ♦ Overview 1 lists individual justifications for eating behavior.

Some of these justifications only apply to particular eating situations, whereas others are universal and independent of eating situations. Some of the justifications are difficult to interpret, and remain vague. Yet, it is obvious (and not surprising) that individuals, in everyday life, rarely base their decisions on a thoroughly sorted and consciously thought-out hierarchical order of worth (♦ see the last citation in the section "Findings"). In everyday life, individuals rarely take decisions on the basis of singular reasons. The findings indicate that individuals simultaneously apply multiple reasons in order to justify their decisions, and prioritize one or the other according to a particular situation. In order to understand eating behavior, it needs to

be considered that e.g. the presence of another person, the implicit social rules of a restaurant, and the feeling of hunger or appetite may – all together – trigger the decision to eat disliked food. Eating behavior, in this sense, appears to be complex, highly dynamic, and resistant against singular reductionist explanations. The social determinants of eating behavior, as described, interfere with each other in non-trivial ways, which refers to the following questions:

- How do individuals make decisions regarding their eating behavior in the face of multiple and heterogeneous criteria?
- Will individuals apply decision making shortcuts (heuristics), and if so: how will they use such shortcuts?
- Can we map specific hierarchical orders with regard to eating decision making?

The concept of *homo cooperativus* allows explaining individual behavior as non-consistent and heterogeneous, and therein provides theoretical explanations for the eating behavior found throughout the empirical data. The empirical data suggest that individuals partially eat disliked food on the basis of what can be described as 'rational' or 'purposive-rational' considerations, for example if eating primarily serves the individual's (anticipated) enhancement of body aesthetics,

health, and physical or mental performance. Likewise, it appears rational when the eater would not want to make an unpleasant impression on others in order to maintain her good reputation. In addition, the empirical material provides a range of examples for what can be described as 'cooperative' eating behavior – for instance when individuals eat food they dislike in favor of a harmonic gathering with friends or family. Within this concept, the individual wish to comply with rules of conduct and courtesy can also be interpreted as cooperative behavior. Idealistic eating behavior however, shows in cases where individuals refer to what they perceive as a role model function to take influence in the infantine taste development. The other's well-being seems to be paramount here. Yet, one could argue that parent's well-being (as in ease of living) rises likewise when children show appetite for a wider range of foods. In this, like in other cases, there's also an element of rational consideration.

In the concept of *homo cooperativus* both selfish and unselfish behavior co-exist, and do not mutually exclude each other, which is why there is no theoretic contradiction. The human image of *homo economicus* falls short in its explanatory power in this case. The concept of *homo cooperativus* does not claim to be a general model for human behavior, but its depiction of human behavior as iterating between (purposive-)rational, cooperative, and idealistic can be mobilized and applied to the given empirical cases in a way that seems plausible and consistent. In this way, behavioral economics provide an alternative model to understand and explain some very particular eating behavior, complementing the BOURDIEUSIAN concept of symbolic consumption.

## Limitations

The findings this study presents are limited in their range i.e. in their generalizability by the explorative (and as such non-representative) character of the research design. Moreover, the study leaves out a number of known determinants of eating behavior by exclusively focusing on eating behavior in particular social contexts [12].

The creation of a graphic (♦ Figure 1) merely serves descriptive purposes and provides very limited additional value from an analytic perspective as it would not allow drawing any clear and unique conclusions from particular situations to particular eating behavior.

The study does not investigate the role of personality, individual experience, or attitude. This would require a psychological approach. However, the individual was not the focal point of this study – neither in study design nor in data analysis. The study does not claim systematic and exhausting presentation of all determinants [13–15] that may affect eating behavior in social contexts. Otherwise for example, time of day, social background and origin, age, gender, religious belief, or education might as well be investigated.

## Outlook

Based on individual empirical cases, the current study investigates individual justifications of the particular eating behavior described as ‘eating against personal food preferences’, and establishes links between this behavior and particular eating situations.

Some of the interviewees’ utterances invite to shift the analytic focus to hierarchical orders of values i.e. value hierarchies throughout individual justifications for eating behavior. This work could be extended to study the structure of individual

decision making processes, including the competition of multiple justifications amongst each other, and the ways in which individuals give priority to particular justifications in subject to particular situations. A quantitative validation of the present findings might also be conceivable, aiming to gather profound knowledge about the influence of social parameters on individual eating behavior which then, in practice, might be transferred to specific approaches in the field of behavioral prevention (as behavioral economics concepts are often mobilized in this field anyway). The concept of *homo cooperativus* – yet underestimated in its potential – might support further research. This study puts forward a number of findings against the picture drawn by media and nutrition experts which depicts the taste and enjoyment as prior above all other reasons to eat and therein turns the consumer into a hedonistic pleasure maximizer. In fact, empirics show that taste, flavor, and pleasure are only some amongst many other criteria to eat.

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### Conflict of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest according to the guidelines of the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors.

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**Dr. Thomas Schröder**  
**Dr. Gesa Schönberger**  
Dr. Rainer Wild-Stiftung  
Mittelgewannweg 10  
69123 Heidelberg  
E-Mail: [schroeder@gesunde-ernaehrung.org](mailto:schroeder@gesunde-ernaehrung.org)

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