

PERSONAL CONSTRUCTS AND FOOD ACCEPTANCE

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Food acceptance is a concept of central importance for food educators and counsellors to understand and explain change, or failure of change, in pattern of food choice. It is also of interest to food marketers and manufacturers seeking to promote the acceptance and competitive selection of their food products.

While 'factors' influencing food selection have long been noted and used to explain food choice (Khan 1981) there remains a problem: lack of a general theory to provide an interpretive framework (a) to understand the working of those 'factors' in consumer food-choice decision-making, and (b) to clarify the often obscure role food plays in the meeting of human needs.

In this presentation the rudiments of a theory of human agency, based on Personal Construct Theory (Kelly 1955) are advanced. As an illustration, the theory is used to make intelligible changes in food acceptance of an overweight client who sought dietary counselling. The client described an event of dramatically changing food acceptance: from uncontrolled eating to induction of vomiting.

The counsellor and client analysed a transcript of the client's description of the event to select (1) particular memorable time 'instants' throughout the event, and (2) key personal constructs used to explain food behaviour at each time 'instant'.

Repertory Grid technique (Bell et al. 1981) was used to systematically record the application of each key personal construct to each time 'instant'. Principal Components Analysis of the Repertory Grid (Slater 1972) enabled an organised picturing and summary of the changes in the client's construing over the event recorded.

Analysis showed changing acceptance of the food to be based upon changing relevance and salience of particular construct guides to action. As the event proceeded it appeared 'as if' construct changes signalled changing personal needs in the choice situation.

The results illustrate that personal acceptance of a food is possible when the constructs with which it is responded to in a choice situation are not barriers to its selection and, for those constructs which are conducive to a food's selection, their use as guides to action must find *justification* with the needs of the consumer in a choice situation.

A new method of dietary counselling and 'focus group' market research based upon Personal Construct Theory and Repertory Grid technique has been developed. The outcomes of this research are hypotheses about, and pointers to what consumers want in a food and relevant constructions within which to promote a food so as to facilitate its acceptance and selection in particular choice-situations.

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