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On Gender Differences in Eating Behavior as Compensatory Consumption

Suzanne C. Grunert, Odense University, Denmark

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this paper is to discuss "normal" eating behavior (i.e., no deviating aspects such as anorexia or bulimia will be considered) as an important aspect of daily consumer behavior with the objective to stimulate research in this neglected area. Emphasis is put on eating behavior that has a compensatory function. Special attention is given to gender differences with a focus on women's particular relationship to food and eating. This focus seems justified for a number of reasons. First, women still have the main responsibility for their families' supply with food and meals and thus most of them still have the gatekeeper function, as Lewin (1963) described it. Second, advertising for food products is very often targeted to women, in a way which is supporting the traditional housewife role. Third, women's magazines supply women with both cooking recipes and diet plans, thus perpetuating the paradox of the great cook that is at the same time physically attractive with a slim figure. Fourth, psychological research aimed at eating behavior has concentrated mainly on women, based on the implicit assumption that women are more willing to indulge in the compensatory and compulsive sides of eating behavior than men.

The paper is divided into three parts. The first part consists of a literature review on the connotative meanings of food and a short note on the concepts of purposes, needs, and compensation. This first part does not explicitly mention the gender issue, partly due to the general character of the concepts described, and partly due to the lack of specific gender-focused or feminist approaches. The second part explains the concept of compensatory eating behavior and how it has been measured so far. Results from several studies conducted both in Germany and Denmark are presented, concentrating on gender differences. The third part outlines a research program on gender differences in compensatory eating behavior.

THE CONNOTATIVE MEANINGS OF FOOD

People seek food, not nutrients. If this statement were false, why then would there be so many culturally different ways of preparing the same foodstuffs, so many societal rules and norms about when and how to serve what kind of meal, so many distinct individual food cravings and food aversions? Hence, the eating behavior of an individual, a group or a culture should be regarded as a phenomenon in which a multitude of physiological, socio-cultural, psychological, and economic factors interact, thus transforming the existential need for nutrients into complex food habits and patterns.

To explain these patterns and to emphasize how different the meanings of food and eating can be, several classifications of connotations have been proposed. The common belief underlying these classifications is that food has social and psychic meanings, that meals stand for a communicative symbolism, and "that eating is an experience that may be invested with many intellectual and emotional values quite apart from metabolic utilization of the food" (Babcock 1948, p. 390). Often based on anecdotal evidence, which mostly stems from psychoanalytic or therapeutic work, these classifications claim to denote the emotional meanings of food. By using the term "emotional" it is implicitly assumed that the pure physiological need for food, i.e., nutrients, is a non-emotional state whereas the above mentioned influencing factors refer to emotional states.

Babcock (1948) distinguished in her classification between three main connotative dimensions: Food as a reliever from anxiety, as a (re-)gainer of acceptance and security, and as a means to influence others, especially children. Kaufman (1954) characterized food connotations by the
labels security, reward, fetish, show-off, and grown-up. Woods (1960) described prestige, maturity, status, anxiety, hedonic, and functional connotations of foods. Jelliffe (1967) classified foods as cultural superfoods, prestige, body-image, sympathetic magic, and physiological group foods. McKenzie (1974) distinguished food connotations, on the grounds of social and economic status of consumers, as an aid to security, a substitute for maternal creativity, as demonstrating group acceptance, conformity and prestige, compensation, and as showing mood and personality.

In an attempt to extract the underlying dimensions of these and other classifications, the following four principal categories of connotative meanings have been proposed (Grunert 1993): security, where eating serves ego-defensive purposes, pleasure, where food is a means for ego-actualization, prestige, where food is used for ego-enhancement, and status, where food increases the ego/environment-integration.

Whereas the first two categories refer to the self, the last ones relate to a social relationship between the self and its surroundings. Universally applicable connotations of food are thus derived, in which the different determinants of eating behavior are intertwined.

PURPOSES, NEEDS, AND COMPENSATION

Individuals associate various emotional meanings with food, they emphasize different values in eating, and they hold numerous attitudes towards food consumption. In a nutshell: "Food feeds the ego, not merely the body" (Pumpian-Mindlin 1954, p. 577). However, all this has usually been neglected when it comes to describe or explain human needs. In need hierarchies and lists of needs, food and/or eating usually have been assigned only to basic or existence needs, probably due to their necessity for maintaining bodily functions. They were never associated with other need-satisfying qualities by neither Alderfer (1969) nor Maslow (1943) nor Murray (1938). I am inclined to suspect that these three men were not very much interested in food and eating - and this suspicion seems to hold true at least for A.H. Maslow, who described the self-actualizing individual as giving food and eating a low importance in her/his life plan (Maslow 1981, p. 220).

Another reason for disregarding the manifold functions of food and eating behavior in need theory may lie in the difficulty of defining needs. I would like to propose a need concept grounded in living systems theory (Miller 1978), where purpose is the more fundamental concept, and where needs are derived from purposes in a fairly complex way: "A need of a living system is a lack of a specific resource which is useful for or required by the purposes of that system. A resource may be matter, energy, or information. Purposes are defined by living systems theory as preferred steady state values for various resources. Purposes, and therefore needs, may be innate, or learned, or innate but modified by learning" (Tracy 1986, p. 212). The only assumptions made in this definition are that living systems exist and that they are purposeful. There is no necessity to assume that needs always lead to behavior, or that they are ordered in hierarchies, or that they are either true or false.

In order to analyze eating behavior in the context of living systems theory, it is necessary to focus on the resources a living system draws upon when pursuing its purposes. Although a need refers to a lack of a specific resource that would relieve the deficiency if it could be obtained, the resource may not be the only one to be capable of doing so. From this perspective, a need is not deterministic, because a system may choose from various alternative resources for relieving a deficit, and because the same resource may be useful for several different purposes of the system. This applies especially to eating behavior and food habits.

COMPENSATORY EATING BEHAVIOR: THE CONCEPT

For example, the lack could be one of tenderness and affection, associated with feelings of loneliness and boredom. To overcome these, one resource could be to contact close friends for arranging a date. Another resource may be to go the movies and see a film, either full of passions and "dangerous liaisons", or humorous and suited for laughing away the unpleasant feelings. Yet
another resource could be a particular food which may relieve the individual from loneliness and boredom - be it marinated herring, ice cream and butter fudge, or a T-bone steak. Turning the examples around, the second case comes up. Food, and therefore eating, can be a resource for specific nutrients influencing mood, a resource for regaining good humor through preparing a delicious meal, or a resource for rewarding oneself for an achievement.

In general terms, the phenomenon is that a lack of x could be cured by a supply of x, but may also be cured by a supply of y. If y is used, this process is called compensation. This term is neutral and is not intended to discriminate between so-called "true" and "false," "conscious" and "unconscious," or "good" and "bad" purposes, needs and resources. In the context of the theory of living systems, in which purpose is the basic concept and not need, it is only important that a system's purposes are met, by whatever resources available. This conceptualization of compensatory behavior is more general than the approach by Grønmo (1988) who defined compensation mainly as an attempt to make up for a general lack of - Maslow's needs for - esteem and self-actualization. Here it is proposed that virtually every kind of need derived from a lack of resources can be fulfilled by various resources as long as these are useful for or required by a system's purposes.

Compensation is mostly associated with alleviating negative emotions, but positive emotions also play an important role in food consumption. It was A.O. Hirschman (1982) who labeled foods as the "truly nondurable goods" which provide pleasures that are simple, familiar, yet intense, and indefinitely renewable because these pleasures are based on the body's recurring physiological need for energy: Foodstuffs disappear precisely when conveying their energy to the organism, and their disappearance is essential to the pleasure felt in the act of consumption. It is this pleasure experience one might seek to maintain or to intensify by eating. "Compensation" in this regard would mean that an individual eats to prolong agreeable emotional states like happiness or joy - or, in terms of the purpose concept, to maintain a preferred steady state value of resources. This is the case when lovers may feel like having a delicious snack after they savored sex together (eating and eroticism have always been closely connected throughout the centuries and in many different cultures; cf. Kleinspehn 1987), when business partners enjoy a gourmet dinner after a successful meeting, or when festive occasions like birthday and wedding anniversary are celebrated with festive meals.

Assuming that the resource chosen by a living system - an individual, a consumer - is food, required for the purpose of regaining or maintaining a preferred steady state of mental homeostasis, what are the reasons for selecting food and not another resource - matter, energy, or information? In attempting to answer this question, it is helpful to recall that an individual's eating behavior is the result of structuring and processing various external and internal determinants, none of which having an independent and direct influence, but all of which interact at any given time (Diehl 1980). Examples of external factors are the availability of food, relationships to family members and other reference persons, influences through media, or time and places of meal intake. Physiological needs, nutritional knowledge, attitudes, self-concept, emotions, and personality traits belong to the internal determinants. Factors that influence behavior both internally and externally are, e.g., education, culture, religion, or status.

When eating behavior is mainly determined by physiological factors, it is not compensatory because in a state where nutrients and energy are lacking, the organism needs this specific resource - food - to survive. Hence, we have to look at the (social-)psychological factors determining eating behavior in order to explain compensation.

The process of compensation can be described in terms of schema theory (e.g., Bartlett 1932; Selz 1913; cf. Grunert 1991a, 1993): A person-environment encounter activates an appraisal schema to evaluate the situation. When the situation is appraised as either harmful or beneficent, an emotion schema is activated. Then, a regulation of the emotion is called for. This is achieved by activating a regulation schema which consists of guide-lines on how to change,
maintain, or enhance the emotional state. If emotional feelings lead to the activation of a regulation schema that calls for eating without the organism being physiologically hungry, the ensuing food intake will then be the result of emotionally induced compensatory eating.

The concept of emotional eating is, however, not new. But it has been discussed exclusively in the context of misbehavior patterns leading to eating disorders like obesity, bulimia, or anorexia (e.g., Conrad 1970; Herman and Polivy 1975; McKenna 1982). Overeating has been described as a means of sedation, diminishing anxiety, counteracting feelings of being unloved, and competition avoidance (Menzies 1970; Kaplan and Kaplan 1957). Moreover, emotional eating was used to explain why obese people eat more than normal-weight people. But it has never been taken as a phenomenon in its own right.

A concept closely related to emotionally induced eating is that of external eating. It is based on Schachter's (1964) cognitive-physiological theory of emotions, suggesting that the eating behavior of some individuals can be relatively independent from internal body signals of hunger and satiety, and, thus, is largely controlled by external stimuli. Many studies have investigated this phenomenon with sometimes contradictory results (e.g., Coll, Meyers, and Stunkard 1979; Goldman, Jaffa, and Schachter 1968; Nisbett and Kanouse 1969; Rodin 1975, 1981). It is related to emotionally induced eating because states of arousal can considerably enhance the susceptibility to external stimuli (Ganley 1988). Hence, this type of behavior is called externally stimulated compensatory eating.

Two suggestions explaining these processes are offered. The first concerns learning experiences. Experiments have shown that the food intake of the same young infant is regulated primarily by internal body stimuli (Davis 1928, 1939). With increasing age, learning experiences have a growing influence on the perception of hunger, appetite, and satiety feelings. These experiences are linked to certain external stimuli interacting with internalized attitudes, educational effects, and socio-cultural norms. When they receive a signal function, the external regulation of food intake can lead to a marked deconditioning of responsiveness to internal states. Emotional experiences accompanying the nutritional interactions between a child and its feeder(s) shape behavioral patterns that influence the ability to identify hunger as a clear signal not to be confused with other emotional states (Bruch 1971). This occurs when food gains connotations like reward or security in the context of stressful experiences. In terms of living systems theory, this is how purposes are learnt. The consequence of such learning experiences is the development of schemata linking food intake to emotional states.

The second suggestion concerns what may be called affective instability. Individuals differ in their emotional make-up, i.e., in the way they react to various daily encounters, manage difficult situations, and handle personal relationships. This is usually referred to as temperament (e.g., Derryberry and Rothbart 1988) or as general arousability, i.e., the extent to which an individual is aroused by any increase in the information rate of her/his surroundings (e.g., Mehrabian 1987). Affective instability is a personality trait associated with genetic predispositions rather than with learned patterns of coping or behavior across a wide range of situations. On the contrary, those feelings responsible for compensatory eating are emotional states of acute, dynamic, and temporary character. Hence, the trait is the frame of reference within which feeling states are handled. It is supposed that a high degree of affective instability results more often in compensatory consumption activities than a low degree.

Compensatory eating behavior should not be regarded as an eating disorder, but as one facet among others of normal food habits. It is a phenomenon each of us will discover occurring to her/him when attentively observing her/himself for a while. It is a behavior similar to the different aspects of self-gifts described by Mick and DeMoss (1990). And it is not necessarily a sign of neurosis or psychosis, as occasional compensatory strategies seem to facilitate an individual's adaptation to environmental conditions: Respondents in a nationwide survey in West Germany who described themselves as "very satisfied" with the life they lead, reported more sporadic compensatory buying than the less satisfied, whereas those declaring to be "not too
happy" more often admitted compulsive buying (Scherhorn et al. 1988). Hence, positive judgments of subjective well-being are, to some extent, associated with compensatory consumption behavior, while compulsive consumption behavior is related to negative judgments of subjective well-being, indicating the inability of individuals to cope with the prevailing circumstances. A continuum is therefore suggested where one end denotes no inclination towards compensatory eating, a medium range with some emotionally induced/externally stimulated eating behavior from time to time, and the other end describing the addictive extreme where compensatory strategies are the rule rather than the exception. This extreme can then result in compulsive food consumption patterns which imply eating disorders like obesity and bulimia.

HOW TO MEASURE COMPENSATORY EATING BEHAVIOR

No survey instrument has been developed so far that measures compensatory eating as an aspect of normal eating behavior. Most eating behavior questionnaires are concerned with eating disorders (Garner and Garfinkel 1979; O'Neil et al. 1979; Wollersheim 1971). A few refer to the concepts of emotional and/or external eating and could be helpful for testing whether the theoretical considerations outlined above find empirical support.

The Dutch Eating Behavior Questionnaire DEBQ (van Strien et al. 1986) is an example for an instrument measuring emotional and external eating. Examples for statements on emotionally induced compensatory eating are: "I have the desire to eat when I am bored or restless," "I wish to eat when I am emotionally upset," or "When I am anxious, worried, or tense, I want to eat." Externally stimulated compensatory eating is measured with statements such as: "If food smells and look good, I eat more than usual," "If I see others eating, I have also the desire to eat," or "If I walk past a snack-bar or a cafè, I want to buy something delicious." Respondents rate 20 statements on five-point scales with the adverbial modifiers never, seldom, sometimes, often, and very often. The questionnaire is self-administered.

It should be noted that the statements on emotionally induced compensatory eating only cover more or less unpleasant emotional states, but no positive feelings - although these are included in the concept of compensatory eating. The scale on externally stimulated compensatory eating, however, also covers pleasant aspects in mentioning hedonic attributes like delicious and good-smelling. These limitations of the questionnaire have to be considered when evaluating the analyses' results. A future task therefore lies in further improving this instrument to ensure that all theoretically relevant aspects of compensatory eating behavior are operationalized.

Factor analysis of the instrument revealed that the items of the emotional eating dimension loaded on two different factors: Three items measure the tendency to eat because of diffuse emotions, whereas the seven other items assess eating intentions caused by clearly labeled emotions. The term diffuse refers to mood-like emotional states such as boredom or loneliness which are of rather low intensity. Clearly labeled means that the actual emotion is so distinct from the preceding emotional state and is felt with such intensity that it can be precisely termed disappointment, irritation, and the like.

GENDER DIFFERENCES IN COMPENSATORY EATING

Results from four studies will be presented. Samples I, II, and III stem from studies conducted in West Germany in 1987 and 1988, sample IV from a study conducted in Denmark in 1990 (more details are given in table 1). The DEBO was translated into German and Danish and somewhat modified (Grunert, 1989a). Principal component analysis reproduced in all samples the expected loading patterns with high loadings on the three factors, and Cronbach's alpha was in all cases and for all scales above .92, thus indicating that the operationalization of the concepts was successful and stable over samples, time, and culture.

As can be seen in table 1, where only differences of mean values significant at the 5%-level (t-test) are reported, women consistently show a higher degree of emotionally induced eating than men,
especially with regard to clearly labeled emotions. Note that the low mean values in sample II are caused by the use of a shortened version of the two scales.

GENDER DIFFERENCES IN COMPENSATORY EATING AS SYMPTOMS OF GENDER ROLES: SOME SPECULATIVE REMARKS

Relatively few studies have examined gender differences in eating behavior. It is common to focus solely on female subjects when studying eating disorders like anorexia and bulimia. Moreover, explanations are concentrated on general mechanisms underlying these disorders, but very seldom clarify why women seem to be more affected than men. Aspects of normal eating behavior are even less frequently studied - except perhaps in anthropological investigations (cf., Grunert 1989b) - and if so, gender differences are mentioned only in the context of gender-dependent physiological needs (nutrition physiology), food distribution within the household (food aid policy), use of convenience products (food marketing), or the like. As for the specific question of compensatory eating behavior, this concept was only recently introduced (Grunert 1991a,b; Scherhorn et al. 1988). All this justifies to sketch in the following some suggestions for explaining gender differences in compensatory eating. The central assumption underlying these speculations is that gender differences in compensatory eating behavior reflect, as well as result from, gender-specific roles society concedes to women and men. The focus is on learning experiences and affective instability.

Given the general importance of socialization processes in the development of values, attitudes, beliefs, and behavioral patterns, it is plausible to assume that learning experiences account for gender differences in compensatory behavior as well. This refers mainly to socio-cultural norms of femininity versus masculinity. Concepts like values, personality traits, the number of roles an individual considers central for her/his identity, and body image, physical appearance and attractiveness, are to be addressed in this context.

Concerning affective instability, a more indirect effect is supposed. As a trait, affective instability is, to a large extent, linked to genetic dispositions and, thus, less susceptible to socialization influences. But learning experiences may, however, influence the way an individual handles her/his temperament. Important concepts here are coping strategies, emotional control, and vulnerability to negative affect.

LEARNING EXPERIENCES: VALUES, PERSONALITY TRAITS, ROLE DIVERSITY, AND BODY IMAGE

With regard to learning experiences, the first concept mentioned is that of values. The value concept attempts to assess those patterns by which individuals orientate themselves in and adapt to their environment. Values are both self-centered and social-centered in the sense that they are at the crossroads between individual and society. They reflect a culture’s orientation standards, where culture can be defined as being expressed in collectively shared cognitive structures which direct behavior mainly via automatic cognitive processes (Grunert, Grunert and Kristensen 1992). Values can be deficit-values when an individual accentuates a certain value because he does not get enough of it, like security or harmony. A number of studies have revealed that values are linked to various aspects of consumer behavior and it has been shown that they influence compensatory eating as well (Grunert 1991b). However, no studies have attempted to probe into gender-related aspects of values, although results show differences in the importance attached to various values by women and men (e.g., Scherhorn et al. 1988; Grunert and Juhl 1991; Grunert and Wagner 1989). Examples are values such as "sense of belonging," "true friendship" or "security."

Assuming (1) that values embrace gender-specific norms acquired during childhood and adolescence under the influence of parents, peers, and popular media, (2) that the function of values is to guide the individual’s adaptation to the surrounding conditions, and (3) that the actual situation in modern societies is characterized by dispersing and, particularly for women, often contradictory
gender roles, it is suggested that the more an individual feels a deficit in certain values or resent the diminishing order of things in general, the more s/he is inclined to compensatory (food) consumption. On the other hand, hedonistic values like pleasure, fun, and enjoyment become increasingly important. It is therefore also suggested that individuals strongly endorsing a hedonistic attitude towards life will use compensatory eating as a resource to prolong pleasurable emotional states.

The second concept which relates to learning experiences are personality traits. Like values, personality traits are acquired during childhood and adolescence, albeit they are to some extent genetically determined. Personality traits can be either self-focused or socially oriented. Research has shown that some traits are more prominent with women than with men and vice-versa (Buss and Finn 1987): Women score higher on traits like empathy, guilt, fear, and altruism, while men score higher on traits like dominance, aggressiveness, excitement seeking, and anger. With regard to eating behavior, personality traits are conceived as intervening variables in the psychological control of food intake. Squires and Kagan (1986) found that, in contrast to common beliefs, compulsive eating of US-American men seemed to reflect profound psychological disturbances as it was clearly associated with an addicted profile, while women's compulsive eating seemed to express a reaction to the stress inherent in a Type A personality. Another study showed that the higher Dutch women scored on a scale of emotional eating, the more they reported feeling anxious, lacking self-esteem, beingsentimental, worried and emotionally unstable, lacking patience, and having a high preference for sweet foods (van Strien et al. 1985). Other research revealed a distinct relationship between emotionally induced and externally stimulated eating and the personality trait of social anxiety, which indicates that individuals marked by a high degree of uncertainty in social situations are more inclined to react to emotional cues and external stimuli (Grunert 1989b). These examples lead to the following hypothesis: If those personality traits that have been suggested to be related to eating behavior in general can be shown to discriminate between gender, then they will also be linked to compensatory eating behavior in a gender-specific manner.

The number of roles an individual considers central for her/his identity is the third concept suggested to result from gender-specific learning experiences. The potential distress associated with role diversity may lead to compensatory eating behavior. This hypothesis builds mainly on results of an exploratory study on possible relationship between roles and eating behavior (Timko et al. 1987). Whereas the multiple roles literature is usually interested in the ramifications of three major roles of women, i.e., mother, wife, and worker, there are a large number of more specific roles that women may have. It was found that women who felt that many roles were highly relevant to their self-esteem were more likely to place greater importance on their own appearance and reported significantly more symptoms of eating disorders than women who reported only a few roles as central to them. The authors suggest that these results refer to the "superwoman" cliché. Superwomen are expected to encompass traits of both the traditional masculine and feminine gender-role stereotypes. They do not seem to prioritize their various roles but rather consider successful performance in all roles to be important for their self-esteem. A situation where new role expectations emerge, while the old ones still remain, may therefore call for some compensation through relatively easy achievable pleasures like eating - be it to intensify pleasure experiences or to cope with stress or to reward oneself for an achievement.

The final concepts in the context of learning experiences are body image, physical appearance, and attractiveness. These are important constituents of perceived femininity that influence considerably female well-being and satisfaction. Already in 1935 Schilder stressed the significance that social norms have on the formation of one's own body image. Women seem to be much more preoccupied with their body weight and physical attractiveness than men, and this preoccupation stems presumably from general socio-cultural pressures towards slimness as the current beauty ideal (Rodin, Silberstein and Striegel-Moore 1985). Male and female judges who ranked photographs of females on an aesthetic basis
preferred ectomorphs to esomorphs, who, in turn, were preferred to endomorphs (Stewart, Tutton and Steele 1973). Similarly, an archival study revealed that "Playboy" centerfolds have been significantly thinner than the average woman over the past twenty years and have also become progressively thinner during this period (Garner et al. 1980). Women's feeling of being fat and dissatisfied with their body was found to be significantly related to striving for perfectionism, to engage in social comparison with other women regarding body weight, and to perceiving social pressure toward thinness (Striegel-Moore, McAvay, and Rodin 1986).

An experiment, based on the hypothesis that "eating lightly" is a gender role conforming behavior for women, demonstrated indeed that women, but not men, "are what they eat" (Chaiken and Pliner 1987). Both female and male judges regarded a woman who ate small meals as significantly more feminine and significantly less masculine than a woman who ate large meals. Furthermore, meal size information influenced the judges' tendencies to attribute stereotypically feminine personality traits. Women who ate smaller portions were perceived as considerably more expressive, kind, and understanding of others, as being more concerned about their appearance, and as significantly better looking than the women who ate large meals. In contrast, the amount eaten by men was irrelevant to the male gender role and therefore not used in judging masculinity and femininity in men. This social norm of equating thinness with attractiveness is responsible for misbehavioral eating patterns like continuously going on and off diets, which finally lead to disorders like anorexia or bulimia. Polivy and Herman (1987) emphasized this concern by stating that permanent restriction on food intake has become such an ubiquitous phenomenon that it could be regarded now as "normal" eating deserving therapeutic treatment. Even though beauty ideals have changed throughout the centuries (cf. Grauer and Schlottke 1987), it seems plausible that a certain percentage - although not the same segment - of women will always suffer from eating disorders in order to keep pace with socially imposed body norms of either Twiggy-like shapes or baroque-like proportions. The relationship to compensatory eating is expressed in the hypothesis that the more women tend to accept current beauty ideals, the more are they inclined to engage in frequent diet efforts, and, thus, to compensate for this stressful life by temporary eating binges.

AFFECTIVE INSTABILITY: COPING STRATEGIES, EMOTIONAL CONTROL, AND VULNERABILITY TO NEGATIVE AFFECT

The second notion intended to shed light on gender differences in compensatory eating is that of affective instability, which relates to individual differences in emotional response style and dispositional levels of emotional intensity. There are hints that these individual differences are to some extent gender-related, influencing, for example, which coping strategies a person chooses when confronted with stressful life-events. Psychological research has been interested in the interaction of coping and emotions, concentrating mainly on the ways in which emotions can interfere with cognitive functioning. But, as has been pointed out by Folkman and Lazarus (1988), coping can also mediate emotions arising during an encounter and transform the original appraisal and its attendant emotion in several ways. The authors report that three types of coping strategies were strongly associated with changes in emotion: Planful problem-solving, confrontive coping, and distancing. While the first was associated with more positive emotions, the two others contributed to a negative emotional state. Unfortunately, gender differences were not reported. However, it is very likely that women and men differ by which coping strategy they adopt and how this choice mediates the emotional outcome of an encounter. Both strategy and outcome are supposed to influence whether eating will be one of the behaviors used to regulate emotions. This relationship can be explained within the schema theory approach briefly mentioned above (Grunert 1991a, 1993).

Closely related is the phenomenon of stress and stress-induced eating. Stress results from an imbalance between environmental load and the ability of an individual to cope, leading to a heightened physiological arousal which is accompanied by augmented levels of adrenaline.
These in turn decrease hunger sensations and the stressed individual loses her/his normal appetite. However, a considerable number of individuals respond to arousal with excessive intake of food. If this type of compensatory eating occurs frequently, it may result in weight gain. One Dutch study revealed that the mid-term effects of high emotional eating on body mass index (weight/height^2, which is a more reliable indicator than body weight) only occurred for men, when assessed six months after a negative life event had happened. There was neither a mid- nor long-term interaction found for women which indicates that there may be several coping strategies operative at a given period of stress. It is also conceivable that there are gender-related differences in the subjective appraisal of undesirable life events like divorces, accidents, or death of a close relative or friend.

In addition to possibly different subjective appraisal, concepts like emotional control (Roger and Nesshoever 1987) and affect intensity and self control (Flett et al. 1989) may play a role in how an individual handles her/his emotions. Emotional control is defined as the tendency to inhibit the expression of emotional responses, which may delay recovery from the arousal associated with emotion, which, in turn, may further the transition from distress to illness. Affect intensity is a dimension of temperament referring to individual differences in the intensity of experiencing emotions. It is significantly positively related to emotional expressivity, emotional sensitivity, and social sensitivity. One striking gender difference is the finding that higher affect intensity was associated with lower general self-control in males but not in females (Flett et al. 1989). But this result rests on a student sample with 96 respondents, thus calling for further substantiation, thus calling for further substantiation. Nevertheless, it is suggested - corresponding to still prevailing social norms - that men score higher on emotional control than women, as, for example, a man is not allowed to weep, at least not coram publico. To the extent that affect intensity can be linked to differences in cognitive appraisals of emotions (Flett et al. 1986), it is suggested that this temperament dimension is more prevalent in women than in men. Both hypotheses imply that higher emotional control and higher affect intensity are related to eating as a compensatory strategy.

A last speculation considers gender-dependent differences in self-focused attention and, thus, vulnerability to negative affect. It has been demonstrated by Ingram et al. (1988), that women show a stronger propensity to self-focus than men in response to stressful events, and that gender role differences may account for this difference: Feminine gender role individuals of both sexes were more likely to display negative affect and to self-focus in response to stressful events than masculine individuals. These results contribute to explain the findings that women are much more likely to be depressed than men. With regard to food habits, it seems evident that those individuals that are more prone to self-focus in stimuli response will, to a corresponding extent, be more open to compensatory eating. For the time being, it looks like that these individuals are mostly women. However, there is an intriguing alternative interpretation suggesting that masculinity may serve as a buffer for stress rather than femininity serving as a vulnerability factor per se (Nezu and Nezu 1987): Instead of women being more vulnerable to negative events and affects, men may be more invulnerable because they are less willing or able to engage in introspection when situational factors would call for such an internal focus. If so, such a behavior should increase the tendency to react to external stimuli in the form of food cues. In other words, invulnerable men are likely to display externally stimulated eating when they tend to direct their attention elsewhere outside their self.

CONCLUSION

It has already been admitted that the ideas presented to account for some of the observed gender differences in compensatory eating are speculative, and that only some of them are backed up by empirical findings. It should be added that some of the concepts presented are of a rather general and fundamental character, which makes operationalization and combination with specific aspects of eating behavior more difficult. This, however, should not impede further research. Additionally, more theoretical work is needed to elucidate the potential influence gender
related social norms may have on compensatory eating. These limitations notwithstanding, this paper hopefully showed that the topic merits more attention by gender and consumer behavior researchers. This will not only be an academic exercise, but of practical importance if one considers the economic effects with regard to food expenditures and advertising claims as well as societal costs for curing consequences of false food consumption patterns leading to organic diseases, that may result from the significance of eating as a means of reaching psychological well-being.

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Table 1

Gender Differences in Self-Reported Compensatory Eating

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sample I</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>emotionally induced eating</th>
<th>externally stimulated eating</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>clear</td>
<td>diffuse</td>
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<td>Sample II</td>
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<td>(nationwide representative)</td>
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<td>Sample III</td>
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<tr>
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<tr>
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