A Recipe For Friendship: Similarity in Food Consumption Promotes Affiliation and Trust

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We find similar food consumption creates friendship and increases trust through shared experience. Friends eat more similarly than strangers and observers perceive people eating similarly are friends (studies 1-2). Shared food experience connects strangers consuming similarly (studies 3-4). Subsequently, strangers consuming similarly trust and cooperate more when negotiating (study 5).

[to cite]:

[url]:
http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/1017061/volumes/v42/NA-42

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

We first report a pilot study validating our assumption that friends consume similar foods and then test our first hypothesis that people infer social ties based on similar food consumption. We predict observers perceive people eating similar food to be friends, compared with people eating differently or not eating at all (study 1). The remaining studies test our predictions that similarity in food consumption increases trust between strangers through shared experience. We predict that because consuming similar food connects people, those who eat similar foods are more trusting of one another in a trust game (studies 2-3) and are better at conflict resolution through cooperation in negotiating (study 4).

To confirm that friends eat more similarly than strangers, in a pilot study, we recorded the food choices of 50 pairs of friends in an a la carte setting during lunch. We created a “friend” condition by recording the food choices for each person eating in the pair as (dis)similar and a “strangers” condition by generating 1350 nominal dyads by aggregating the meals of individuals from real dyads and rearranging them into randomly matched pairs. We find friends eat more similarly (46%) than strangers, (21%; χ²(1, N = 1400) = 17.26, p < .001).

Study 1 examined whether observers infer friendship from similar food choices. As predicted, participants were more likely to judge pairs eating similar food as friends (62.3%) compared with pairs who ate no food (55.7%; χ²(1, N = 1388) = 6.35, p = .012). Further, participants judged only 43% of pairs who ate different food as friends, which is lower than for pairs who ate no food, (χ²(1, N = 1390) = 22.29, p < .001). These results support our prediction that observers use food similarity as a cue for how connected pairs of individuals are. Both the presence of similar food and dissimilar food were cues of social connectedness.

Studies 2 and 3 tested the hypothesis that strangers who eat similar foods feel closer and trust each other more. Participants ate similar or dissimilar food as another person and participated in an “Investment Game” that operationalized trust as the amount of money invested in a partner. In study 2, participants invested more in a confederate (i.e., trusted more) when a confederate chose the same food (M = $2.37, SD = $0.85) than different food (M = $1.94, SD = $0.85; t(67) = 2.10, p = .04). In addition, participants felt closer to confederates choosing the same food as them (M = 3.97, SD = .93) than differently (M = 3.41, SD = 1.00; t(67) = 2.41, p = .019). Increased closeness mediated the effects of food similarity on trust, (β indirect = .06, SE = .04; 95% C.I. = [.01, .16]; based on 10,000 bootstrap samples).

In study 3, participants assigned the investor role gave more money to fund managers assigned the same food (M = $2.40, SD = $0.75) than different food (M = $1.86, SD = $0.99; t(86) = 2.89, p = .005). Investors also felt closer to fund managers consuming the same food (M = 3.05, SD = 1.02) than different food (M = 2.55, SD = 1.06; t(86) = 2.26, p = .03. Increased closeness partially mediated the effects of food similarity on trust for investors, (β indirect = .06, SE = .04; 95% C.I. = (.01, .16); based on 10,000 bootstrap samples). Studies 2 and 3 support our theory that sharing in a similar food consumption experience increases closeness and trust between strangers. Even when assigned similar foods, strangers felt closer to and gave more to their partner in a subsequent trust game, compared with strangers assigned to different food.

Study 4 examined the implication of increased trust between strangers who consume similarly for cooperation in negotiation situations and improved outcomes. We predicted and found sharing in a food experience results in a faster resolution of conflict and more beneficial outcomes to both parties compared with those who consumed differently. Pairs in a negotiation who ate similar food settled faster with fewer strike days (M = 3.63, SD = 4.05) than pairs who ate different food (M = 7.33, SD = 6.69; t(60) = 2.66, p = .01). Those eating similar food had better outcomes overall (M = $857,109, SD = $3,183,018) than those eating dissimilarly (M = $1,813,667, SD = $3,866,621; F(120) = 10.41, p = .002). Because participants were paid based on performance, those who ate similar food ended up earning more (M = $4.52, SD = $0.63) than those assigned to different foods (M = $4.08, SD = $0.86; F(1,120) = 13.45, p < .001). Lastly, those eating the same food felt marginally closer (M = 2.96, SD = 0.92) than those eating differently (M = 2.69, SD = 0.85; F(120) = 2.97, p = .087). These results suggest an important implication of eating similar food in negotiating: participants on separate sides of an argument who consumed similarly reached a faster resolution benefiting both parties.

People pursue many goals through the food they consume, such as, taste, nutrition, and cost (Connors, Bisogni, Sobal, and Devine 2001). This research identifies affiliation as a particularly important goal in food selection and consumption (Cruwys et al. 2012; McFerran, Dahl, Fitzsimons, and Morales 2009), and documents not only that affiliation breeds similar food consumption, but that incidental, similar consumption breeds affiliation. Although similarity in food consumption should not be indicative of whether two people will get along or whether a person is more trustworthy, we find that individuals treat it as such, feeling closer and trusting those who consume as they do. In this way, food serves as a social lubricant; by consuming similarly, people can immediately begin to feel camaraderie and develop a bond, leading to smoother transactions from the start.

REFERENCES

