

A Study of Sex Differences in Food Likes and Dislikes¹

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Very little information is available concerning the food preferences of men and women. The kind of satisfaction people get out of eating shows a marked difference among individuals. Most people have favorite dishes and pet abominations among foods. Doubtless, violent dislikes for generally accepted foods frequently originate in unpleasant experiences connected with them. Such an experience might be indigestion. The reasons for extreme likes would be less easy to trace. They may have a similar origin in forgotten pleasures somehow connected with things that now arouse them.

Although there is a wide variation of preferences, it is recognized that in the last analysis all tastes in food can be reduced to four or at the most six fundamental kinds—sweet, sour, bitter, salt, alkaline, and metallic, separately and in combinations. Any blend of these with pressure, pain, warmth, cold, and various odors, make up all of the varieties of taste we experience in foods.

Not only are there individual likes and dislikes for foods, but also there is a belief in the existence of a definite sex difference in these likes and dislikes. Dunlap² makes the following statement:

A recent investigation on the likes and dislikes of men and women has brought out the indication that woman is relatively stronger in her dislikings, man in his likings. There are matters of secondary desires and aversions, of course, and it is not certain yet that it is generally true. Yet, certain common-place observations, especially in regard to foods, seem to bear out this conclusion. The results of wider experimental work on this point will be important.

Procedure

In order to make a trustworthy investigation of the variations due to sex alone, it is essential to secure subjects for the investigation of both sexes who are near the same age, who have the same social status, and who have been subjected to like training and social surroundings. The complete fulfillment of these conditions, even in the most democratic community, is impossible. Probably the nearest approach among adults to the ideal requirement is afforded by the undergraduate students of a co-educational institution.

The individuals who furnished the basis for the present study were students of Beloit College, Beloit, Wisconsin. They were from all four classes, freshman, sophomore, junior, and senior. Their ages ranged from 17 to 25 years. Questionnaires were given to these young men and women with the following instructions:

Below are lists of foods which we would like to have you check (✓) according to whether you *like* them, are *indifferent* to them, *dislike* them, or have *never tasted* them. p. 228.

Four columns were provided for checking and headed with the above titles.

¹ The data reported here were gathered at Beloit College. F. Dunlap and B. Woodruff kindly assisted in the collection and tabulation of the questionnaire reports.

² Dunlap, Knight. Social psychology. Williams and Wilkins. p. 42.

Only the columns of "like" and "dislike" were tabulated, but it was considered necessary to include the other two columns in the questionnaire form so that the subjects would not be inclined to check as "dislike" all foods which were not actively liked and as "like" all foods not actively disliked. In other words, we were interested to know whether their reaction was one of approaching or avoiding. This procedure also explains why the percentages of the "like" and "dislike" columns do not total 100% in each case. A certain percentage of items were eliminated from the record sheet because they were checked as either "never tasted" or "indifferent." Questionnaires were returned from 184 males and 214 females.

The list of 289 items of food was assembled by consulting numerous cook books and manuals on home economics. Not all of the possible foods were listed nor all of the ways of preparing them. The list, however, was considered as presenting a fairly representative selection of foods and could be used effectively in the time available.

Results

The percentage of men and women liking and disliking was figured by dividing the number checking the liked (or disliked) column by the total number of that sex and computing it to the nearest whole number. However, fractions less than 1 (0 to 1) were considered 1%. To a large extent edibles which are liked by a large majority of men are also liked by a large majority of women. Some items which show a wide variation between the sexes include raisin and mincemeat pie, milk, poached eggs, rice, coconut cake, tuna fish, grouse, quail, and figs. There is also a similarity between the sexes regarding their dislikes. Here, such foods as raisin pie, avacados, milk, rice pudding, and creamed cabbage show the greatest differences.

When we consider the foodstuffs which are liked, we find that 172 of the 289 items are liked by a greater percentage of men than women, 23 are liked to the same extent, and 94 items are liked more by the women than by the men. Or from the percentage standpoint, 59% of all the foods liked are liked to a greater extent by men than by women, 8% show the same liking by the sexes, and 33% show a greater liking by the women. When we examine the food disliked, we find that the women indicate a greater dislike than the men for 174 items (60%); in 80 items (28%) the difference is in favor of the men, and in 35 items (12%) they are the same. From this it appears that the ratio is about 2 to 1 in both the likes and dislikes, a greater percentage of women disliking items and a greater percentage of men liking them.

There is a statistically significant difference³ in 49 cases. Of the 172 items liked by men we find that 31 items show a significant difference. Of the 94 foods liked more by the women than by the men, 4 were significant. In the dislikes there are three cases having a significant difference in favor of the men and 11 in favor of the women.

From this investigation of food preferences it appears that women are relatively stronger in their dislikes; men, in their likes.

³ Garrett, H. E., 1937. Statistics in psychology and education. Longmans, Green. p. 228.