Food decisions: Causes of biases

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It seems that people rely on two different cognitive systems when making decisions: The “experiential” and the “analytic” system. The analytic system is slow and elaborated, whereas the experiential allows quick decisions. People often rely on simple heuristics (a rule or a method that comes from experience and helps you reach an educated guess), in order to make quick decisions.

There are a number of studies that suggest that people rely on simple heuristics in food decisions and that this may result in biased decisions. One experimental study showed that consumers assess the same cereals as healthier if it contains ‘fruit sugar’ compared with ‘normal sugar’.

Another example is food additive E-numbers. A study found that adding an E-number to a food additive decreases its perceived naturalness. Perceived naturalness may also explain why consumers will be reluctant to accept risks associated with cultured meat that are accepted in the case of traditional red meat. This status quo bias seems to be a large barrier for the acceptance of novel food technologies. Perceived naturalness is not only important for the evaluation of foods, but it may even influence people’s sensory liking of a food product.

It also seems to make a difference for consumers whether a food has been self-prepared or prepared by another person. People tend to like food they make themselves better than food produced elsewhere. It could even be shown that people consume more of a milkshake if they make it themselves, compared with a milkshake prepared for them.

Finally, heuristics may result in different risk perceptions of experts and laypeople. A study found that two
groups considerably differ in their risk prioritisations of various food hazards. The findings may help to better understand why experts and laypeople often differ in their assessments of food hazards.