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Publisher: Routledge

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Health Psychology Review

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rhpr20>

Appropriateness standards can help to curb the epidemic of overweight: response to Dewitte and to Herman and Polivy

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Accepted author version posted online: 04 Jun 2013. Published online: 02 Jul 2013.

To cite this article: Denise de Ridder, Emely de Vet, Marijn Stok, John de Wit & Marieke Adriaanse (2013) Appropriateness standards can help to curb the epidemic of overweight: response to Dewitte and to Herman and Polivy, *Health Psychology Review*, 7:2, 173-176, DOI: [10.1080/17437199.2013.810960](https://doi.org/10.1080/17437199.2013.810960)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/17437199.2013.810960>

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Appropriateness standards can help to curb the epidemic of overweight: response to Dewitte and to Herman and Polivy

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(Received 11 April 2013; final version received 30 May 2013)

In our paper ‘Obesity, overconsumption and self-regulation failure: The unsung role of eating appropriateness standards’, we argued that it is not the omnipresent availability of palatable foods alone – what is generally called the ‘obesogenic environment’ – that should be held responsible for the epidemic of overweight, but also the absence of norms of appropriateness about what, where and when to eat, that goes hand in hand with this abundant presence of foods. Siegfried Dewitte and Peter Herman and Janet Polivy shared their thoughts about this proposition and we appreciate the opportunity to discuss this issue more elaborately.

Keywords: overconsumption; appropriateness standards; obesogenic environment

In our recent paper, (De Ridder, De Vet, Stok, De Wit, & Adriaanse, 2012), we argued that it is not only the omnipresent availability of palatable foods – what is generally called the ‘obesogenic environment’ – that is responsible for the epidemic of overweight and obesity, but also the absence of norms of appropriateness about what, where and when to eat, that goes hand in hand with this abundant presence of foods. Siegfried Dewitte and Peter Herman and Janet Polivy shared their thoughts about this proposition and we appreciate the opportunity to elaborate on this issue and respond to their comments.

In his commentary on our paper, Dewitte (2012) argues that appropriateness standards may not have faded ‘accidentally’ but for the specific reason that the present abundance of foods no longer calls for the social regulation of individual needs. Specifically, he states that abundance naturally implies the fading of norms because fulfilling one’s individual needs would no longer harm group interests, as would be the case when there is food scarcity. Consequently, abundance no longer calls for the regulation of individual behaviour by social rules. This view is clearly inspired by an evolutionary account of the function of social norms. Although compelling, such an account also has limitations, in particular, as it highlights the regulation of conflict as a major driving force of human evolution.

Could there be another reason for social norms to evolve, beyond regulating the eternal conflict between individual concerns and the group as a whole? We think there is. Evidence from evolutionary biology increasingly suggests that evolution is

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served by cooperation rather than competition (e.g., De Waal, 2008; De Waal, 2012). For example, research on animals shows that there is a natural tendency to cooperate and to reconcile after incidents of aggression, suggesting that empathy is a powerful driver of evolution. That would imply that there is a reason to comply with group norms also when there is no conflict between individual and group interests or when there is no scarcity. In a similar vein, it has been argued that food sharing and other cultural practices surrounding the gathering, distribution and preparation of foods has tremendously contributed to the evolution of the human species (Rozin, 1999a), which also suggests that social norms have a function in eating practices in the absence of scarcity. In fact, one could even argue that social norms evolve from cooperation and redistributing wealth, as is also stated in the literature cited by Dewitte (e.g., Fehr & Fishbacher, 2004). Furthermore, apart from the question whether abundance would either make or not make social norms redundant, the point we wanted to make in our paper is that the present abundance of foods marks a very specific and sharp turning point with previous decades, making social norms that were functional in the old days all of a sudden no longer valid. Put differently, we consider the current absence of norms as resulting from a very rapid change in the food environment with norms lagging behind. The environment has changed much more rapidly than norms could evolve. If we consider this rapid change in the food environment as a natural experiment, we could wait for 10 or 20 years and see whether social norms that are adjusted to this new situation eventually evolve. That is, if people would have the time to adjust their behaviour to the omnipresent availability of foods, it is possible that new norms will develop that regulate the intake in the midst of plenty. There are some indications that such a process is already going on given, for example, an increased interest in 'mindful eating' that could be interpreted as an attempt to prefer quality of foods over quantity and enjoy foods rather than mindlessly consuming them. Another indication is the popularity of books on new food rules such as the one by Michael Pollan (2009) that we already cited in our article. Although these examples involve the instigation of new rules rather than a 'spontaneous' evolutionary process, the very fact that there is an interest in new rules that are better adjusted to a changed environment illustrates our point of view. Interestingly, however, although the comments by Dewitte seem to suggest another explanation on the current absence of social norms than our view does, we arrive at the same conclusion. We share the view that social norms should evolve naturally from the daily practice of regulating eating behaviour rather than that such norms should be imposed on people by health professionals or other agencies. This natural evolution of new standards of regulation of food intake could be encouraged by more discussion about what is appropriate or normal behaviour when one has the opportunity to eat at any moment or any place.

Peter Herman and Janet Polivy (2012) see merit in our approach that nicely aligns with their own extensive work on social norms in eating behaviour. We appreciate the contribution of Herman and Polivy to the literature on the role of other people in regulating individual eating behaviour. Their programme of studies has been crucial in understanding the importance of norms with its specific focus on modelling the amount of food eaten by others. Our call for appropriateness norms highlights another aspect, however, as we made a plea to look not only at how much other people eat (in response to what others in their near presence eat) but also and specifically at what, where, when and with whom they eat in an attempt to

understand how the ‘obesogenic’ environment pervades individuals’ eating standards. Examining this broader category of norms in the specific context of the changed food environment may help to understand in what way this environment affects social norms and thus nicely complements earlier work in this area. Having said that, we were intrigued by Herman and Polivy’s comment that in spite of the importance of norms that they endorse, they wonder whether norms may be effective in curbing the epidemic of overweight. Specifically, they state that only internalised norms will help people to regulate their food intake and that it is useless to dictate norms, thus casting doubt on the possibilities for ‘creating’ new norms as a means to prevent overweight. We agree that enforcing norms on people is not going to be very helpful, but then, that is not what we meant when we called for new norms. New norms should evolve naturally, but this does not imply that there would be no role for smart inventive strategies that encourage the development of such norms. Inspiring examples that promoting social norms may help to regulate unhealthy behaviour can be derived from the literature on smoking, showing that installing norms that regulate where and when people are allowed to smoke are effective in decreasing the prevalence of smoking (Rozin, 1999b). Fortunately, there is now increasing evidence that subtle hints about the appropriateness of food intake indeed help to regulate eating behaviour. In a series of studies, we found that providing people with suggestions (descriptive information about what others with whom one identifies do) about food choice and the appropriate amount of intake influenced their intake (Stok, De Ridder, De Vet, & De Wit, *in press*). Importantly, these norms are also effective when others are not actually present and, even more important, influence food choice when they do not refer explicitly to food intake or eating behaviour. For example, Prinsen, De Ridder, and De Vet (*in press*) demonstrated that simply leaving chocolate wrappers on a counter made people eat more compared to when such wrappers were absent without them being aware that they regulated their intake in response to the apparent (non)consumption by other people. This finding demonstrates that social norms may influence behaviour in a non-conscious manner, not requiring any effortful decision making. Herman and Polivy’s concern that adherence to social norms places a burden on individual decision making and draws on scarce self-control resources is thus not justified. In fact, another study (Salmon, Fennis, De Ridder, Adriaanse, & De Vet, *in press*) even demonstrated that people with low self-control compared to people with high self-control were more inclined to act upon social norms provided by social proof heuristics. Although this may sound counterintuitive it makes perfect sense: under low self-control conditions people are more inclined to act on impulse, but as they act on impulse they are prone to any type of external influence – including norms that suggest them to eat healthily. Together, these studies demonstrate that – different from what Herman and Polivy believe – there is great potential to steer healthy choices by social norms in a way that does not enforce such norms, but that simply and subtly suggests people to behave differently.

Eating appropriateness standards clearly form an exciting and lively area of research. While there is much to still be determined, we feel confident that fading eating appropriateness standards has played an important role in the development of the obesity epidemic. Similarly, the re-installment of eating appropriateness standards constitutes a promising avenue for beginning to tackle this epidemic, provided that the standards are community-driven and autonomy-supportive.

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