

# Informed Food choice

## Introduction

An informed food choice is an informed choice made about food consumption. It is a choice that is not made blindly. It is an enlightened choice made by the individual based on information, which has been obtained by the consumer.

When consumers make choices about buying something or not, or choose between different foodstuffs, information is believed to give clarity to the options. The aim of disclosing information is to increase the transparency of the food market, which is believed to enable consumers to judge, compare, and choose foodstuffs according to the values and preferences they find relevant.

Informed food choice is an ethical concept based mainly on two ethical principles: autonomy and integrity. The idea of autonomy emphasizes the consumers' rights to noninterference and self-governance. Informed food choice is a concept that relates to and to some extent is based on the ideas of informed consent and voluntary consent to be found within medical ethics. Common to all these concepts is the principle of autonomy as a basic value to be respected. In an ideal world, informed food choices are believed to be autonomous and voluntary decisions that are neither manipulated by others nor coerced. Informed choices are, in opposition to coerced actions, based on liberty and freedom.

However, as food choices and consumption are closely entangled with social life, culture, and identity, food choices are not only about self-governance. Indeed, freedom to choose cannot be seen as an unconditional ideal when it comes to food choices. The principle of integrity refers to the life coherence of the consumer of which food culture and consumption is often a central part. Food choices are associated with caring for relatives, friends, and others and as such not independent but relational. The idea of integrity gives priority to the social, cultural, religious, and environmental contexts in which food choices are made and on which they depend.

It is common to analyze compound notions by breaking them down to basic components. This entry follows that tradition by analyzing the concept of informed food choice by examining the meanings of choice and informed in the light of the principles of autonomy and integrity.

## Food Choice and Autonomy

The emergence of a massive consumer culture in affluent societies and a strong emphasis on individuality has contributed to a focus on individual choices (see, for instance, Taylor 1991, pp. 37-38). This development is reflected in the number of theories on choice: rational choice theory, public choice theory, social choice theory, and economic models of consumer choice. Food choice has also been theorized (see, for instance, Hausman 2012), often with the aim to map determinants in food choices. The accent on choice in theory and also in liberal rhetoric is not only a sign of a stronger emphasis on the freedom and rights of individuals. It is also a "mise en discours" or verbalization of the duties and responsibilities of the individual: the individual and consumer rather than society and the government are through the rhetoric of free choice and informed choice made responsible for that food choices are sound, healthy, sustainable, etc.

Central to the idea of informed choice is the concept of individual freedom, which is based on the normative idea of individual autonomy. Autonomy (Greek: auto-nomos) literally means self-rule, self-determination, or self-government, and in this sense it was originally used normatively in the description of sovereign (autonomous) nations. With the German philosopher Immanuel Kant, the concept was given a strong twist toward the individual. The idea of individual autonomy is normative in the sense that it is not something naturally given; it is a description of a vision of ideal decision-making. Autonomy is not something inherent in man; it is rather something to strive for and which is facilitated through education and cultivation (German: Bildung). As is the case with autonomy, we can also say that informed food choice is not something inherent or given; it is rather something to strive for and which must be facilitated through education in food literacy.

As part of the vision of the good life, the normative concept of autonomy is based on the negative experience of personal infringement or injustice when being forced or determined by external conditions against one's own will. Individual autonomy, as one of the oldest and most fundamental principles of civil rights, is intended to protect against infringements; it is the right of the individual to make decisions without coercion. Therefore, at a very general level, an autonomous choice is a voluntary action, which is not being forced upon one by external conditions. Hence, independence is traditionally considered a core value of autonomy. Autonomy then becomes the capacity for independent

decisions, choices, and actions, which implies independence from others or from others' views or preferences (O'Neill 2002). This is often referred to as negative freedom or liberty: the freedom from interference by others. Therefore, choosing and free choice have traditionally been hailed by liberal thinkers, emphasizing the value of noninterference.

Based on the idea of autonomy, informed food choice entails protective arguments and productive arguments. Protective arguments are concerned with the protection of consumers from fraud, deception, manipulation, and health risks. Productive arguments may, for instance, be concerned with specific qualities of food or production practices, like organic or free-range products, which are made known to consumers (see Rippe 2000 on protective and productive arguments as well as negative and positive liberties within food consumption). In both cases, communication and the disclosure of information to consumers are the keys to enable selection of products in accordance with specific consumer demands and thus to ensure some level of consumer autonomy. Hence, the autonomy of consumers should be understood not only as a substantive right, that is, as the right to simple non-coerced free choice, but also as a procedural right for consumers with regard to access to impartial and reliable information on food and the production of food.

The autonomy of food choices can be situated between the following poles: (1) voluntary/independent actions and (2) coerced actions. These poles are extremes and are also rare positions. Food choices are usually situated somewhere in between. Choosing food is a complex act as many factors influence food choices. Attempts to map determinants of food consumption choices are numerous and so are attempts to influence food choices. Marketing techniques are used to increase sales by specific product placements in shops and supermarkets, by the use of attractive packaging, advertisements, promotion campaigns, sales, and so forth. Healthy diets can be promoted by campaigns, nudging, taxation, prohibition, or by other means. Choices are often analyzed from three perspectives: persuasion, manipulation, and coercion.

A person can be persuaded or convinced by arguments to buy or eat certain kinds of food. This implies that choice is based on some level of independent and voluntary reflection. It also implies that some information is shared and may be even negotiated.

A person can be manipulated through, say, advertisements to buy and eat certain kinds of food, which implies that information given on the food is partial and may be incorrect.

A person can also be forced to eat certain kinds of foods. It is not uncommon that children dislike some kinds of foods. However, parents may ask and sometimes force them to eat it anyway. Another kind of coerced food choice can be found in some institutions, like prisons or even hospitals, where people have no choice than to eat what is served. Poor people may likewise have no other opportunity than to buy the cheapest available food.

## Information and Integrity

Basically, food choices occur in two main settings: (1) shopping for food (or when growing food for oneself) and (2) eating and drinking. In both settings food choices might be made by oneself and for oneself. However, food consumption is rarely a completely solitary activity but in fact a social activity. As much as food is shared in communal eating during meals, much food shopping is not only shopping for oneself but also shopping for others. The relational aspect of food shopping comes about when, among other factors, other peoples' food preferences are taken into account (Coff 2013). Food shopping choices are thus not made in a vacuum but in social settings, where others' views and preferences are taken into consideration.

Likewise, participants in social meals care for social relations and other peoples' reactions. It is common that food manners require that food served by the host is not rejected - even in situations where the guest may not find the food tasty or edible - as this might be seen as a sign of lack of appreciation and community feeling. This relational aspect of food consumption often emphasized by food sociologists indicates the limits of the idea of autonomy and the need to supplement it with other ethical notions. The concept of integrity can be used to normatively describe the relational aspects of food consumption. Integrity can be both a virtue describing the honesty and reliability of a person as well as describing life coherences of a person, which should not be manipulated or destroyed (Rendtorff and Kemp 2000, p. 39). The life coherence of a person is the life story of that person and the relations that person has. Because food choices and consumption do have consequences for others and the environment, food choices and consumption can be seen as expressions of relations to other people as well as to the environment (see Coff 2006 for a detailed description of the relational dimensions of food consumption).

The idea of informed food choice is that food consumers should be informed about food in order to respect consumers' integrity and autonomy and thus to enable consumers' consent. Beauchamp (2010, p. 56) states that in general the

literature on informed consent proposes five elements as the analytical components of informed consent: competence, disclosure, understanding, voluntariness, and consent. This approach can be used in the analysis of what informed food choices entail on the informational level by asking the following questions:

- What are the competences needed by food consumers?
- What information should be disclosed about food?
- How should consumers be informed about food in order to enhance their understanding?
- What makes an informed food choice voluntary?
- What do food consumers want to consent to?

To begin with the questions on what information to disclose and what food consumers want to consent to, it is important to note that the idea of informed food choice concerns a specific kind of information, namely, information about the food product itself - and usually not on the food preferences of someone else that one is shopping for. This is important as it shows something about the nature of the information to be disclosed. Mapping of consumers' concerns about food shows what kind of information food consumers find relevant as issues, i.e., the issues that consumers want to be informed about, respond to, and eventually consent to. Table 1 shows a list of major consumer concerns about food. These concerns can be considered as major issues driving the demand for informed food choice. The first seven concerns can be described as substantial and the last three concerns can be classified as procedural as they refer to how information is shared and decisions are made.

Table 1  
 Ten consumer concerns about food production (Coff et al. 2008, p. 11)

1. Animal welfare
2. Human health
3. Methods of production and processing and their impact (e.g., environmental, landscape)
4. Terms of trade (fair price, fair working conditions, fair salaries, etc.)
5. Working conditions
6. Quality (intrinsic qualities such as taste, composition, etc.)
7. Origin and place
8. Trust
9. Voice (participation)
10. Transparency

The list shows the embracing character of food consumption (see also entry on Food Policy and Ethics for the embracing character of food policy). Consumers may ask for or demand informed food choice to assist them in decision-making in relation to a number of issues: avoiding or reducing health-related risks; comparing products for culinary qualities; estimating ethical aspects of a foodstuff like environmental impact, working conditions, or animal welfare; or simply to enhance trust in the food consumed. The list of consumer concerns given here is not complete, and it is most important to understand that consumer concerns are dynamic and vary among people. This means that the issues to be informed about are indeed not static but are under constant development.

Choosing food can be a highly reflective activity, based on careful judgments and evaluated arguments, which take several consequences of food consumption into consideration. Many of the issues mentioned in Table 1 are captured in the concepts of political and ethical consumption. Political and ethical consumption is a reconfiguration of the consumer's role, merging it with the citizen's role, which has led to the term citizen-consumer (Korthals 2004, p. 149). Surely, few consumers are seriously concerned about all the issues mentioned in Table 1. It is more common to be concerned about a few of the issues mentioned and take action on these or to be only superficially concerned and not take any action on it. The issues mentioned in Table 1 can be considered as what consumers might want to consent to in relation to food. If, for instance, novel foods and other new food processing practices pose new risks to health, consumers may want to be informed about it in order to consent to it or not. The comparison of informed food choice with informed consent used in medical ethics seems especially appropriate when it comes to the consequences of food intake on health. Frewer et al. (2002) confirms that in general people want to be provided with information on food risks in an understandable and intelligent way in order for them to make informed choices about exposure to food risks.

In view of the ten concerns listed in Table 1 and given the fact that food choice is embedded in cultural, social, biological, ethical, religious, and commercial contexts, it is obvious that informed food choice can be a demanding process. Judgment of food qualities in relation to the ten concerns requires a high level of competence among food consumers. However, consumer competences vary a lot, and their ability to understand information on food can be limited by, for instance, immaturity, irrationality, or lack of interest. Food policies improving food literacy have been proposed and adopted in several countries in order to enhance consumer competencies. However, the idea of informed food choice in itself should also help competent and interested consumers to enhance their level of understanding and improve the process of decision-making.

The question on how to inform consumers is intriguing and challenging. The amount of information that can be communicated about foodstuffs is potentially enormous. Scientific uncertainty when it comes to, for instance, health claims and the environmental impact of different kinds of food production practices like organic farming and conventional farming contribute further to the opacity of information about food. The effort needed by consumers seems intimidating and immense in the light of the endless number of food products and the complex consequences that food production and food consumption have on health, environment, fair trade, etc. Furthermore, poor communication between producers and brokers in the food sector makes it even harder for consumers to find wanted information on food.

Food labels have been introduced to reduce complexity and make choices easier for consumers. However, labels have also been accused for being too reductionist: Klompenhouwer and Van den Belt (2003, p. 548) argue that labels and claims (and also advertisements) about food health run the risk of being quite superficial and also that the actual wording of a claim can be interpreted in different ways.

At the other end of the spectrum, much more detailed information on food can be presented by the use of the Internet. Codes, like the QR codes, presented on the packaging can make information on food products easily accessible for consumers by the use of QR scanners in smartphones or computers (Beekman et al. 2008, p. 289). This approach can be characterized as user-friendly as it potentially allows consumers to search for specific information relevant to them, and thereby sorting out irrelevant information. On the other hand, this approach runs the risk of information overload, which is known to reduce consumer engagement.

If informed food choice is to be of any value, it is paramount that the information provided on the food is trustworthy. To ensure trustworthy information impartial third parties can be asked to control and guaranty that disclosed information is correct.

The voluntariness of consumers' informed food choice is ensured when no unwanted influence is exerted and when consumers are not controlled or manipulated by other persons or institutions. A kind of coerced consumer choice can occur when only one product or brand is available. In the case of market monopoly, consumers may be "forced" to buy a specific brand of, for instance, milk as the only alternative is not to buy any milk at all.

## Critique of Informed Food Choice

Individual choice has been used in liberal and market-oriented rhetoric to describe in positive terms the emancipation of the individual from social ties. In this context, the word choice embodies the freedom to choose one's own individual lifestyle. In affluent, market-oriented societies, consumption choices are seen as a means for the realization of the self and for the creation of personal identity. There are, however, also critical positions deploring the development of the consumer society and the culture of choice.

Baudrillard (1998) describes what he calls a "phenomenology of consumption," pointing to the shallowness and fragility of consumption cultures. For Baudrillard consumption is characterized by self-interest and hence ignorance of the surrounding world. His phenomenology of consumption describes how attention and concern are turned toward individual consumption and satisfaction at the expense of care for other human beings and the common good.

Another critic of free choice is Schwartz (2004). According to him free choice is hailed in liberal cultures as the new dominant ideology: "[O]ur culture sanctifies freedom of choice so profoundly that the benefits of infinite options seem self-evident." However positive freedom of choice may seem, it has several ramifications on the more philosophical, existential, and psychological aspects of life. When it comes to food, the number of choice opportunities in supermarkets is enormous. As a consequence the time spent on shopping for food is increasing, as it is time-consuming to seek information and compare food products. Comparison of foodstuffs and considering alternatives may lead to other anxieties: for what if the choice made is not the best, but turns out to be the worst choice? This is referred to as the tyranny of comparison or the tyranny of small decisions, which instead of making consumers happy makes them worried

and anxious. According to Schwartz (2004, p. 221) "having too many choices produces psychological distress, especially combined with regret, concern about status, adaption, social comparison, and perhaps most important, the desire to have the best of everything - to maximize."

Other critics of the informed choice rhetoric have argued that it is used as a liberal pretext to shift responsibility from the political system to individualized consumers, thereby making peoples' individual lifestyle responsible for health, environmental sustainability, etc. An example of a health policy that emphasizes informed food choice and lifestyle can be found in the UK government's White Paper on public health (HM government 2004) in which it is argued that "people want to be able to make their own decisions about choices that impact on their health and to have credible and trustworthy information to help them do so."

Another critique stresses that not all issues are suited to individual choices. Some issues are too complex for consumers to take a stand on - such issues should therefore be regulated by public authorities. Food safety has been mentioned as being such a highly complex issue that should not be left to individual choice but rather regulated by public authorities. Scientific uncertainty, for instance, about the health effects of foodstuffs, has also been mentioned as a worry that makes individual choice by consumers inappropriate.

To carry out informed food choices is demanding in terms of knowledge, competences, and intellectual capacity. Informed food choice favors educated and enlightened people and especially those who are in possession of food literacy. Critics argue that less skilled people are unlikely to use disclosed information about food in their food choices.

Finally, the information overload of consumers is seen to be a general problem of informed food choice as consumers only have a limited amount of attention for food (Berg and Gornitzka 2011). Labeling as a strategy to reduce information to easily recognizable symbols like organic labels or animal friendliness is widely used in the food sector. However, as the number of informative labels increases, food labels may also add to the lack of transparency on the food market.

## Conclusion

Food production and consumption influence health, environment, social structures, etc. For this reason consumers are increasingly interested in information about these effects. Disclosure of information about the consequences of food production and consumption is essential for the idea of informed food choice. An informed food choice is an enlightened food choice made by the individual based on the information made available. Food choices are made when shopping for food or when eating/drinking, and information is believed to give clarity to the options by increasing market transparency, supporting rationality (the best choice), consumers' self-governance (autonomy), and life coherence (integrity). On a practical level, informed food choice remains an ideal to strive for, as information on food often is inadequate.

## Cross-References

Food and Choice  
Food Marketing  
Food Waste and Consumer Ethics  
GMO Food Labeling  
Political Consumerism: Consumer Choice, Information, and Labeling

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