Greetings,

A few months ago you participated in a study about healthy eating and said that you would be interested in hearing about the results. We appreciate your help with our research, and we are happy to tell you about the findings. The study was administered by Anna Cooke under the supervision of Dr. Winnifred Louis and Dr. Joanne Smith. If you would like to ask questions, to comment on what you read, or to find out more, you can contact project staff by phoning (07) 3346 9515, by emailing w.louis@psy.uq.edu.au, or by writing to Dr. Winnifred Louis, School of Psychology, McElwain Building / University of Queensland / St. Lucia, QLD 4072. You can also read about other studies that we’ve done about social influence and decision-making at http://www.psy.uq.edu.au/~wlouis/.

SUMMARY OF RESULTS: RAISING THE SALIENCE OF STUDENTS’ UNHEALTHY EATING

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WHAT WE WERE LOOKING FOR.

The primary goal of this study was to investigate students’ healthy eating in relation to whether or not they were thinking about students as a group with a bad diet. The theoretical concern is that campaigns to address health behaviours, like healthy eating, often target populations which are seen as unhealthy and often do so by drawing attention to the frequency of unhealthy behaviour in the population (“Growing Australian obesity!” etc.). We think that hearing that unhealthy behaviour is common can actually create a backlash against the intervention and lead to less healthy decisions.

Specifically, we believe a key mechanism in this process is the perceived descriptive norm. If behaviours are uncommon (negative descriptive norm), people are less likely to do them. So what happens if you explicitly tell people that a health behaviour is rare in their group? In this study, we brought participants into the lab, pre-measured their attitudes to healthy eating, and then did or did not tell them that other students as a group had poor diets. We also did or didn’t tell the participants that UQ staff didn’t eat healthily – this “outgroup descriptive norm” (information about what is common in groups that you don’t belong to) had little effect. Finally we described the unhealthy behaviour either directly negatively (by telling students that 85% of students eat unhealthily) or indirectly (by saying that 15% of students eat positively) – but this also had little effect. The key variable was whether or not students had been told other students ate unhealthily – then we looked at participants’ attitudes and actions immediately and two weeks later, plus how much they identified as UQ students.

SOME DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION ABOUT PARTICIPANTS

From July to October 2007, 139 UQ students completed the study, along with others on financial and political decision-making. Some non-UQ students participated, but they were excluded from the analyses below. Participants ranged in age from 17 to 43 with a median of 19. Most were women (63%), and of White/European heritage (78%). All were Australian citizens, and all were compensated $10 for their participation in the study.

WHAT WE FOUND

OVERALL ATTITUDES AND ACTIONS. Before any intervention was delivered, the majority of participants (89%) agreed that healthy eating was important. That is a
significant positive finding! However, when we look at what people reported two weeks later, on average people said they ate healthily only half the time. Many people (29%) didn’t eat healthily during those two weeks in any aspect of their diet, and no participants reported they met all of the recommended Australian dietary guidelines re fruit, veggies, low fat, etc. in their everyday eating.

EFFECTS OF THE MANIPULATIONS OF SALIENT STUDENT UNHEALTHINESS. Consistent with our expectations, when participants were told other students didn’t eat well, their attitudes to healthy eating became more negative. Overall, being given this info also made participants report lower identification as UQ students. However, high identifiers (who saw being a UQ student as more important to them) became more likely to say that healthy eating was difficult for them if they had been told other students didn’t eat well. This perceived difficulty of healthy eating was weakly associated with less healthy eating intentions in future. Two weeks’ later, we found people who had been told other UQ students didn’t eat well reported eating fruits less often in the intervening 2 weeks, but this effect wasn’t observed on other measures (like veggies and low fat eating).

WHERE NEXT?
Looking at the dangers of perceived negative descriptive norms is a line of work that we’ll be focusing quite a lot on in the next couple of years, with many other studies testing the underlying and moderating processes in health, as well as other kinds of decision-making like money and politics. The theoretical purpose is to explore the basis for inferences about population norms, the interaction of descriptive and injunctive normative messages, and the processes that drive participants’ responses. However, as the present study illustrates, there is also an important social component, which is to figure out how to prevent bad social problems (like widespread unhealthy eating) from becoming reinforced simply because people see the bad behaviour as common.

THANKS AGAIN…
So that’s a description of what we found in this study. If you have any questions, or would like a copy of the longer write-up when we get that done (in several months) please get in touch. And thank you again for your participation and interest!

SUGGESTED FURTHER READING