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The Problem of Changing Food Habits Report of the Committee on Food Habits 1941-1943 (1941)
National Research Council (NRC)

FORCES BEHIND FOOD HABITS AND METHODS OF CHANGE

KURT LEWIN

INTRODUCTION

The following report is a partial account of a study conducted by a field
staff at the Child Welfare Research Station of the State University of Iowa.
The objectives of the study were twofold; namely, 1) to investigate some
aspects of why people eat what they eat, and, if possible, 2) to study methods
of changing these food habits.

In studying the first question we have tried to combine approaches of cul-
tural anthropology with quantitative methods of psychology. Two techniques
were used. One is the Bavelas test, a projective questionnaire, with which
2,300 school children were tested. The second method consists of interview-
ing housewives. Five groups were studied; these representing economic sub-
division (high, medium, and low income levels) of White American stock,
and two subcultural groups, Czech and Negro.

Several methods of changing food habits were compared experimentally.
One experiment compares the effect of a method of group decision in one case
with the effect of a lecture. Another experiment compares the effect of group
decision with the effect of a request.

The results of the interviews with housewives are presented first.

1. WHY PEOPLE EAT WHAT THEY EAT

A Method of Interviewing and Analysis

After a period of preliminary trials of various methods, the final data were
collected during May and June, 1942. It should be kept in mind that the results
describe the attitudes and habits of the people at that time (only sugar was
raised). The material was collected from the residents of a midwestern
town with a population of about 6,000. Although surrounded by farming
country, the town has a variety of industrial plants. It has employed a nutritionist
for a number of years and has had a good nutrition program.

* This study was financed by a grant from the Committee on Food Habits.
† The staff consisted of Alex Bavelas, Leon Festinger, Myrtle Hubbard, Patricia Wood-
ward, and Alvin Zander. Alex Bavelas acted as “discussion leader,” Myrtle Hubbard as
“expert” or “lecturer” in some of the experiments. One experiment was conducted by
Ben Willenera, Alvin Zander, Beatrice Wright and Patricia Woodward did a major
share of the analyzing and writing.
‡ indebtedness is expressed to Dr. Sybil Woodruff, Head of the Department of Home
Economics of the State University of Iowa, and to Prof. Lynn Garwood and Dr. Alice E.
Satter, of the Department of Sociology, Coe College, Cedar Rapids, Iowa.
§ A preliminary report has been made but complete results are not yet available.
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