

Impact of Changing Food Choices and Eating Habits on Nutritional Status in European Countries

*Freising-Munich 21-22 October 1995
Workshop under the auspices of IUNS, AGEV and BFE*

Experts in the multidisciplinary field of food habits research were invited to a workshop partly supported by a grant from the European Commission. The workshop was convened at the end of the annual meeting of the Working Group on Nutritional Behaviour (AGEV) by the Committee on Nutrition and Food Choice recently established by the International Union of Nutritional Sciences (IUNS), chaired by Ulrich Oltersdorf who is Director of the Institute of Nutritional Economics and Sociology of Germany's Federal Research Centre for Nutrition (BFE). The IUNS has charged the Committee "to review the impact of changing food choice and habits on nutritional status" and this Workshop endeavoured to advance this mission initially within the European context.

The foundation of this Committee recognizes the many important research connections between food habits and health. Attempts to encourage people to adopt healthier food choices and eating habits have mostly failed so far, we need to know why, and how to do better in future. The behaviour and motivation of those people who have improved their diets are largely unexplored. Indeed, little research attention in nutrition has been focussed on processes by which a person's diet can be changed to improve nutritional status. Answers to questions about how to achieve such improvements, and even what improvements are needed, are often group- or place-specific and involve economic, political, administrative, cultural, interpersonal and cognitive aspects, in addition to natural sciences and material technologies.

Eleven European countries were represented at this first Workshop convened by the Committee by 30 research workers from a wide range of disciplines (anthropology, ethnology, economics, history, marketing, nutrition, medicine, psychology, sociology, etc.), based in academic, governmental and commercial institutions. It was agreed to seek for additional members of the IUNS Committee from Eastern Europe, Africa and Latin America.

The participants had been asked to provide written papers on the following areas: (1) The current status of research on food habits, food choice and eating patterns among the relevant disciplines in their different countries and regions (giving definitions of these habits, patterns, etc.); (2) National activities that aim to change food habits; (3) The position of research on food habits within nutrition research (including academic training) in the national nutrition policy and Nutrition Society; (4) Identification of priority areas for food habit research in general and for joint research projects involving Europe.

It was agreed that these papers (list appended below) would be circulated among participants. IUNS contacts and enquirers, with a summary of the Workshop's conclusions and actions, as follows. Material from the Workshop could also be used to inform research-funding bodies.

RESEARCH NEEDS

Since food habits are under-investigated even in Europe, a great deal of research is needed. The following topics were identified without setting priorities. It was agreed that it was

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desirable to focus European research on certain groups and to develop methodology in a number of directions.

Research Topics

Eating patterns (spatio-temporal structure of food and drink intake; meals, snacks, drinks); basic research is needed to provide better methods of identifying patterns. Relationships between eating patterns and nutritional status and health, including how the distribution of energy/nutrient intake over the day relates to health.

The context of eating: the family, gender, paid work, culture, social roles of food and of health.

Influences on eating from demographic changes (e.g. changes in household sizes and stability), economic and social changes in transforming countries of eastern Europe and changes in eating technology and communication media.

Roles of food in everyday life, e.g. the time budgets of different consumers; interactions of eating with other activities.

Beliefs and emotions related to eating practices, food materials, food technology and food-related safety and health, including body-weight control, perceptions, values, motives, intentions, preferences, moods and food choices.

Role of international culture in food habits and their changes.

Influences on eating habits by public authorities and by media, roles of formal education and scientific information.

Research Target Groups

Minorities and underprivileged groups: how their ways of life affect their health.

Older people in varied life situations.

Single-person households and small households with changing interpersonal structures

Household activities related to gender that provide a context for eating activities.

People who successfully lost weight: which eating habits in which people contribute to ability to control weight.

Cross-cultural comparisons, especially between similar groups in different European countries (e.g. small households).

Research Methods

Interdisciplinary work between natural scientists and social scientists must be developed further, including collaboration in development of methods (e.g. surveys).

Truly longitudinal studies are needed (repeated measures of the same people, in designs capable of distinguishing biography from social changes); representativeness of the cohort sample is less important.

Culturally and personally sensitive research methods are of great importance (non-numerical and psychometric construct and verbal analyses; observational designs; biographical methods).

Educational, media and other interventions must be evaluated in their processes and outcomes (including ethical aspects).

Re-analyse existing data on food choice to address issues such as the above: first identify existing data sets suited to secondary analysis and evaluate the quality and comparability of the data.

Methodology needs more standardization, making research instruments comparable (e.g. for lifestyle assessment, eating pattern measurement, behavioural effects of food) and valid (e.g. food composition tables, nutritional status assessment, recording of free-living nutrient and energy intake and energy of activity; sampling representatively of specified populations, getting hold of social reality with cultural data, assessing the actual cognitive processes organizing individuals' actions).

ACTIVITIES TO FOLLOW THE WORKSHOP

This huge range of tasks was broken down into three priority areas for further research development, each with a group of volunteers coordinated by a secretary. These working groups themselves would organize their further activities, including raising funds as needed. The groups are open to additional participants not at the Workshop.

The working groups were given the following tasks:

- (1) Review (and perhaps re-analyse) existing data on food choice, including critical evaluation of the comparability of data among European countries (coordinator: R. Prättälä, Helsinki). Since the Workshop it has been proposed that this group focuses on disparities in food choices within each country analysed.
- (2) Review (and perhaps develop) methodology to identify and to assess eating patterns, directed towards evaluation of health outcomes of patterns including meals, snacks and drinks (coordinators: D. Schlettwein-Gsell, Basel & U. Ollersdorf, Stuttgart).
- (3) Review research on changes in food habits including intervention and process evaluation, not attempting to describe all changes but focusing on those which might be affecting nutritional status (coordinator: J. Westendorfer, Hamburg).

SUMMARY PERSPECTIVE

The Workshop ended by accepting the proposal that a priority for this IUNS committee is to facilitate research around the world into determinants and consequences of food-choosing habits as sound bases for industrial and educational actions that are effective in enabling individuals to change their eating habits in a manner that actually reduces their risk of disease.

PAPERS CONTRIBUTED TO THE IUNS-AGEV-BFE WORKSHOP

- A. Alberti-Fidanza
Food choice and habits and nutritional status in groups of children, adults, elderly, pregnant and lactating women in the Perugia area (Central Italy).
- A. Anderson
A. Bodensiebt
Changing food habits in Scotland. Social strategies, income and food habits—tentative generalization.
- D. A. Booth
Effective dietary change—UK and EU research projects funded or proposed.
- C. Brombach
Food habits of special groups: the elderly.
- C. Cavadini
Adolescent food habits in Europe.
- P. Falk *et al.*
Cultural differences in oral consumption—a comparative research project.
- G. Feunekes *et al.*
Influences of the social environment on nutritional intakes.
- D. Friebe & G. Ulbricht
Changes in nutritional behaviour 1990/1991 (Potsdam Study).
- I. de Garine
Food consumption and the anthropologist.
- E. Grimm
Meals in Germany—September 1995.
- L. Holm
Food habits, food choice and eating patterns—social science research.
- S. Jansson
Nutritional status and cultural analysis.
- A. Kanelou
The DAFNE Initiative.
- T. Kutsch
Sociological statements.
- D. W. Marshall
Meals and food choice: meals in the research agenda.
- A. Murocci
The social science of food choice in Britain.
- U. Ollersdorf
Review of meal pattern changes in Germany.
- U. Ollersdorf *et al.*
Food patterns of policemen on patrol duty: A case study of Stuttgart, Germany.

- C. Pfau & J. Pickarski
R. Prättälä
C. Rejman & B. Kowrygo
D. Schlettwein-Gsell
R. Shepherd
H. J. Teunberg
W. Verbeke *et al.*
J. Westendorfer

Nutritional behavior of the aged in private households. Socio-cultural research on food and nutrition in Finland. Consumer behavior—a case study in Poland (Outline of the Project).

Impact of meal patterns. Psychological model of food choice.

Notes on food habit research in Germany—an interdisciplinary perspective.

Consumption of light products in Belgium.

Food choices to promote healthy body weight and to prevent obesity and eating disorders.

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