

Food habits, food choice and eating patterns - social science research

Paper for the UINS-AGEV-BFE-Workshop: Impact of changing food choice and habits on nutritional status in European Countries,

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1. Current status of social scientific research in Denmark

The social science perspective on food and food habits has been promoted in Denmark by two large governmental research programmes, Food Technology Research and Development Programme (FØTEK 1 and 2), and by smaller ministerial programmes. All programmes aim at strengthening the international competitive power of Danish agriculture and/or food industry. The programmes have supported social science studies and together they have initiated studies at the 5 universities in Denmark, at the Agricultural University in Copenhagen and at the business schools. As a result of the FØTEK programme a centre for »market surveillance, research and strategy for the food sector« has been established at the Aarhus School of Business, called the MAPP Centre. Its budget is 33 million DKK for the next 3 years (almost 5 mio. ecu). 22 researchers work within the centre.

The studies at the Agricultural University, at the Research Department of Human Nutrition, focus specifically on health and nutrition. Three researchers work here currently, and studies have been done within 4 areas:

- 1) Barriers and possibilities in introducing healthier diets - with special focus on experiences with living on a healthy diet. A number of studies are done in connection with dietary interventions, which are either community-based

or take place at the Research Department of Human Nutrition. Qualitative as well as quantitative methodology is used.

- 2) The role of food and health in everyday life. A qualitative interview study has been done analyzing consumers' narratives on specific meals. The study has produced a broad data material which is analyzed from different perspectives: a food quality perspective (how do consumers in their everyday lives perceive and act in relation to food quality?), a health perspective (what is the role of health in everyday food related practices?) and the identity perspective (how do consumers consider personal, cultural and national identity in their everyday food practices?). More projects are in the starting-phase within this area. A literature review of gender and food focusing on men and women's relationship to food, eating, meals, cooking and health will start soon. A qualitative interview study about food in the lives of families with children above the age of 11 is awaiting final financial support.
- 3) The role of food in the hospital. A project has studied the meaning of food and the social significance of meals in a children's ward in a hospital.
- 4) The history and social role of the nutritional science. A study has recently started, which analyses dietary advice and nutrition information to the public in a historical perspective.

At the Institute of Ethnology at Copenhagen University studies have been made on everyday practices and thoughts related to food in different types of households. A theory of household types relating food practices to an overall life mode of the consumer as either wage-earner, self-employed or careerist has been developed. The studies document strategic differences of how different types of consumers plan their meals, provide food stuffs, perform the housework related to food and their meals, etc. The data from the studies have been analyzed from different perspectives: food quality, the relative importance of food in everyday life, meals and family life.

In the first FØTEK working period the MAPP Centre coordinated a wide range of projects from the universities and business schools. The first series of projects included several projects aiming at improving the competitive position of the Danish food industry through more efficient product development, as well as projects focusing on consumers' interests and their possibilities to influence

product development. It also included micro-economic studies about the use of foods related to households' resources (time and money), and the development of market surveillance systems.

In the current and second FØTEK period the MAPP Centre has achieved a permanent status. Its research is now concentrated in four research areas and researchers from the business schools dominate the programme. The research areas are:

- surveillance and analysis of consumer behaviour
- surveillance and analysis of distributors and competitors
- development of competencies for product innovation
- quality function deployment.

The purpose of the Centre is to »conduct research which can contribute to making the food industry more market oriented« (MAPP newsletter 1/95) and its research aims at strengthening the competitive position of the Danish food industry on the international markets. Health is not of primary interest for the Centre, but the consumer behaviour theme naturally also has some relation to the health orientation of consumers insofar as it influences their buying behaviour.

In conclusion: A rather large number of research projects have been initiated over the last years within disciplines such as sociology, ethnology, economics, marketing, business management etc. Several projects include elements which are relevant for health and nutrition although health is rarely in focus. With the MAPP Centre the food industry's perspective has now a strong and institutionalized position in Danish social science research on food. The public health perspective is weaker. It exists primarily in the studies at Research Department of Human Nutrition where health promotion is the aim of most research. The resources for this kind of research are much more scarce, however.

2. National activities with the aim of changing food habits

The responsibility for information about nutrition to the public is shared by the Ministry of Business and Industry and the Ministry of Health. The National Consumer Agency in the Ministry of Business and Industry produces information

material to households and institutions. Over the last few years material has been published aimed at the general public, but also focusing on children, adolescents and the elderly. The National Food Agency in the Health Ministry runs campaigns. Over the last few years they have issued very concrete advice on how to cut down on fat in an ordinary Danish diet and are now slowly focusing more on how to increase the intake of fruit and vegetables.

Nutrition information to the public is probably the most important instrument in the Danish nutrition policy. Efforts are made to coordinate both public and private information, and a collaboration between public authorities and the retail trade has started, which aims at combining an information effort with promotion of healthy foods in the supermarkets. In addition to this several local projects have been initiated - both in geographical areas of Denmark and in workplaces.

Other instruments in the nutrition policy are nutrition research and mass catering, i.e. advisory services are offered to the mass catering sector.

The National Food Agency, which is responsible for the Danish nutrition policy, draws frequently on social science research - on an ad hoc basis.

3. The position of social science research on food habits within nutrition research and training

At the Research Department of Human Nutrition, the main centre for nutrition research in Denmark, one of six research areas is called: »Factors determining dietary habits including technological, commercial and sociological conditions. The area covers methodology and sociology«. The area is divided into two sections, each headed by a senior researcher. One sector develops methodology for and conducts dietary intake studies. The other section is the sociological area which has already been described.

From September 1996 the first Danish master's programme in nutrition is planned to start. Social science is integrated in this programme in two ways. One of four mandatory courses in the first semester will be a course in the history and societal role of the nutritional science. It aims at giving the students an overview over the

shifting social roles of the nutritional science throughout history. It also aims at widening their perspective on food and nutrition. Additionally an optional course on the 9th or 10th semester will be a course in the sociology of food and nutrition.

In the schools of Home Economics in Denmark sociology and social science is part of the curriculum.

4. Priority areas

I think there is a need for strengthening a perspective on food and eating, which takes the experienced realities of everyday life as a starting point. This would provide a good basis for policies and considerations with a health or a consumers interest perspective. This would also provide valuable information for the food producing sector, but the interests of this sector should not be the main rationale behind an increased research effort. Food producers, consumer organisations and health authorities may in many ways have identical information needs, but health promotion e.g. also needs a broader focus on consumers' relationship to food and eating than what can be directly related to buying behaviour.

There is a need of more knowledge about the role of food in everyday lives of people throughout the various regions of Europe. We need cross-national comparisons of the structures of everyday life and meal patterns, of the meaning of food and meals and of which problems people are concerned with regarding food and eating. Such knowledge is of vital importance for health promotion and for food and nutrition policies on an European level. It will also be valuable for the food industry and agriculture when they develop strategies for product development, marketing etc.

I will suggest cross-national studies within 5 themes, which I think needs special attention:

1. Food concepts and food ideology, i.e. notions of good food, bad food, food for special occasions, food for different groups of special people, food hierarchies, etc. In short, rules for when and how to eat foods and how to combine them.

Knowledge about this is a key to the understanding of the differentiated character of European food culture.

2. Food and health. Knowledge about food and health, including popular notions of the role of food in relation to health and illness. The role of health in everyday food practices. The relationship between food safety issues and health considerations is an important issue including the study of which behaviours or practices are the result of these concerns. Knowledge about this would provide a better basis for health and food safety policies.
3. Food and household economy. Strategies for food acquisition and purchasing, values and attitudes towards food preparation, division of labour within households, relative importance of costs and time-saving versus cultural conventions of home cooking or good housewifery, money management (distribution of income within households and of responsibility for making decisions and payments). Empirical data about this would provide vital information about differences and similarities in the everyday routines related to food and about the roles and powers of different household members.
4. Food and social relations. Food and the family. Family meal patterns, food related division of domestic labour, decision making, menu planning and social organisation of meals. Knowledge about this would answer the question whether the family meal is still the typical meal throughout all countries in Europe or whether individuation is a growing trend all over Europe. This needs to be considered in relation to the changing family structures in Europe. There is an increase of small households, especially single-person households. More knowledge is needed about which social practices, patterns and norms are produced under these new circumstances. Gender needs to be considered as well as a theme in its own right. There is a need for more detailed information about gender differences in relation to practices and thoughts related to foods and meals both in shared households and in single-person households.
5. The legitimacy of public health authorities and scientific expertise. It is important to know how Europeans view the role of nutritional and other health sciences, and of public information systems about health and nutrition. It is also important to base European health policies on a sound analysis of how Europeans view the role of experts, the national state and EU in promoting healthier diets throughout Europe. If there is a widespread weariness of public health propaganda this needs to be considered.

The five themes above call for both quantitative and qualitative methodology. cross-European surveys about specific practices such as meal patterns including social organisation of meals, the kind of foods people eat, their cooking and shopping practices would be very useful. However, there is also a great need for qualitative methodology to be adopted on a cross national scale. I think this will be the best way to learn about how different kinds of Europeans view the meaning of foods, meals and food-related practices. There is a need for studies using open methodologies which allow consumers from all over Europe to speak about food in their own voice. In this way more can be learned about the diversities and similarities of food cultures throughout Europe.

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