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## Background

After World War II food habits and nutritional status changed significantly in Sweden. In addition to a less demanding lifestyle everyday diet became more rich in energy. Consumption of traditional staples, e.g. porridge, potatoes, and root vegetables, was decreasing while people seemed to enjoy more and more of meat and dairy products.

In the middle of the 1960s these changes in food choices were assigned a causative role in creating new health problems, primarily heart and circulatory ailments, but also obesity, constipation, iron deficiency, and caries. From 1969 and onward, therefore, several campaigns were launched in order to teach the Swedes all about the pros and cons of fibre and fat. At the same time the ordinary consumer could witness a rapidly increasing number of low-fat alternatives to a variety of milk and meat products.

The effect on the dietary pattern has, hitherto, been far from overwhelming. For the first 10 to 15 years no significant changes were noticed with respect to the vital balance between fat and fibre. However, the last big survey, conducted in 1989 - and some minor subsequent studies - shows clear tendencies in what's considered a desirable direction. Perhaps, argues the nutritionists, this is a sign of a slow, but still, adaption to the message delivered in laborious information activities.

Considering the fact that Swedes in general, compared to most Europeans, eat comparatively well (from a strictly nutritional point of view), this could lead to the conclusion that nothing more needs to be done to improve the scientific knowledge on the topic of 'food choice'. But this is hardly the case. Looking more thoroughly at available data, from both surveys and sociological and ethnological case studies, and taking account of current political and economical changes, there are quite a few urgent problems that call for attention. Let me point at two of them.

## Social poverty in the well-fare state?

What we know about the state of affairs could actually be seen as a circumscribed picture. Data on 'average' consumption patterns derives largely from a rather well-to-do social strata. Those who engage themselves in surveys and case studies are typically well organized members of complete families. We have, therefore, reason to believe that the 'real'

dietary pattern would turn out differently if other social categories were included on a representative basis.

In Sweden special attention should be directed toward the single person households, today representing circa 45% of all household units. This phenomenon, which might be interpreted as a sign of an increasing social poverty in the well-fare state, is almost completely neglected in food oriented research.

Some subgroups, for instance young women and men living alone waiting for a partner to come along, are perhaps of less interest from a nutritional point of view. Others, where the 'singleship' is of a more permanent - and often involuntary - nature, addresses more vital issues. Consider for instance old widows and widowers; or divorced middle age men, who, among other things, distinguishes themselves by an extremely high death-rate. The scientific challenge in these cases is (of course) not only measuring the nutritional status of food habits but rather to explore the 'culture of loneliness'. What are the values and world-views of these milieus? What does items and concepts such as 'food', 'health' and 'future' really represent?

A shift from communal to individual responsibility?

A more recent societal trend that calls for attention is the reconstruction of the well-fare state. Sweden has a long, and to some parts outstanding, tradition of 'public care'. In practical terms this means that a variety of individual needs once catered for within the family or the extended household, successively have been the responsibility of official authorities. Attending small children, taking care of sick adults and weak elderly has, to mention some examples, become more of a public and less of a private matter.

Food and eating easily fits into this picture. 'Today' (I will comment the quotation marks in a moment) practically all adults and school children, which means a great majority of the entire population, have their lunches served at restaurants or canteens. And for pre-school children, visiting the nursery school, it's quite common to have even breakfast outside home. The elderly, who lives alone and can no longer manage cooking on their own, are entitled to 'home service', which means that an employee of a public organisation makes visits once or twice per day to deliver or to cook a hot meal.

No doubt Swedish cuisine is - and more obviously has been - extremely 'public' in a European perspective. Personally I still remember one of my earliest cultural shocks when, as a school child in the 1960s, visiting a Danish family and learning that all children carried a food package to school. It wasn't unpleasant at all eating these sandwiches out on the play-ground - just strange and utterly primitive.

But the times are changing. Today (with no quotation marks) politicians of (almost) all denominations agree that the key problem connected to the economic regression in Sweden is public spending - and that the only way of solving the crisis is by cutting the expenses. This has not only effected the health and unemployment security systems - but also the way of eating. To put it shortly, a great deal of the 'public eating' mentioned above - in canteens, schools, nursery schools, and in services provided by public organisation - have been financed by common means. And these means are now diminishing. Therefore, in schools all over the country pupils (or their parents) have to

pay for lunches (which means that the incentives for eating at school are no longer what they used to be); in canteens you have to pay significantly more (which means that lots of people turn to the home made food package solution); in nursery schools breakfasts and afternoon snacks can not be taken for granted (which means changing family routines); the 'home service' has become a limited good (which leaves many elderly without sufficient daily attention).

Regardless of the opinions on these matters one can hardly question the need for more comprehensive nutritional evaluations of this process, perhaps especially in context to the point mentioned above, namely the 'coping capacity' of different types of households. But also in this case nutritional analyses would benefit from a cultural perspective. For instance, how are concepts such as 'private' and 'public', 'familism' and 'communality', 'home-made' and 'industrially produced' perceived and valued in different socio-economic categories? How do people think about 'responsibility' when it comes to chores and everyday routines since long defined as a public interest?

### Cross-cultural studies

The bottom line in these reflexions is, obviously, that I argue for intensified cultural analyses of food practices. A key to understanding food choices is to learn more about how people think about and value food items and meals - and to learn more about various social contexts in which eating takes place and in which food plays an important role in social interaction.

However, for me it seems no longer sufficient conducting studies on this complex strictly within the national border, which has been more or less a general rule. To develop our knowledge further more emphasis has to be laid on cross-cultural studies, especially with reference to the rapidly integrating European arena.