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Socio-cultural research on food and nutrition in Finland

Discussion paper prepared for the IUNS-AGEV-BFE-Workshop.
Impact of changing food choice and food habits on nutritional
status in European countries
Freising-Munich 21.-22.10.1995

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Draft. Please do not quote.

1. Concepts

Food behaviour - human activity related to acquiring, distributing and consuming food - is determined at least by biological, psychological, cultural, social and economic factors. Concepts like food habits or food choice are often used as synonyms to food behavior. 'Food habits' and 'food choice' refer more closely to the psychological, socioeconomic and cultural than biological determinants of eating. This paper focusses on the social and cultural dimensions of food behaviour.

Food behaviour can be approached as consumption behaviour or as health behaviour. In Finland the both approaches have been used. Studies cited here have been carried out within the fields of sociology, public health and social nutrition.

2. Current status of research

2.1. Doctoral dissertations

Until now, two doctoral theses concentrating on social and cultural dimensions of food behaviour have been published in Finland.

The first thesis was written by a sociologist, Tarmo Koskinen, and accepted in 1971. Koskinen's thesis, called 'Our daily bread. A study of the connections between the structure of society and family diet' (Koskinen 1971) can be classified into sociology of consumption. It remained as a single case: the author did not continue food related research and had no followers.

The second doctoral thesis of the field (Prättälä, Ritva: Young people and food. Socio-cultural studies of food consumption patterns) was accepted in 1989 in the department of nutrition. Prättälä's (1989) thesis is an effort to combine nutritional science, sociology and social anthropology. Food behaviour is understood as health behaviour rather than as consumer behaviour.

The third doctoral thesis (Roos, Gun. 1995: Cultural Analysis of children, food and gender in the United States. Department of Medical Anthropology, University of Kentucky, Lexington) on social and cultural aspects of food behaviour was not published in Finland but the author, Gun Roos (M.Sc. in nutrition, University of Helsinki), received funding for her studies from the Academy of Finland.

At the moment there are at least five doctoral students working with socio-cultural food research in Finland. Two of them are sociologists with no formal education in nutritional sciences. The three are nutritionists with additional studies in sociology or educational sciences.

In addition to doctoral theses there are, naturally, several other research activities such as master's theses, occasional short term projects, essays written by senior scientists in connection with seminars or projects not planned as sole food studies.

2.2. Contents and approaches 1986-1996

Contents of Finnish research are here described with the help of articles published in the Finnish Journal of Social Medicine and some conference proceedings representing typical Finnish approaches.

A special issue of the Finnish Journal of Social Medicine called **Factors influencing food choice and food behaviour** came out in 1986. It was based on presentations given in an international conference organized by the Academy of Finland in 1984. Anne Murcott (UK) and Gretel Pelto (USA) participated the conference as foreign guest speakers representing the fields of sociology of food and nutritional anthropology. In addition to papers written by the guest speakers the issue included four review papers written by Finnish senior scientists.

The second special issue on food in the Finnish Journal of Social Medicine will come out in 1996. It consists of 6 articles and 11 short papers. Among the writers there are both junior and senior scientists, all of them have experience of empirical food research.

Between 1986 and 1996 Finnish studies have been presented for example in the following publications:

Somogyi JC, Koskinen Esko H. **Nutritional Adaptation to New Life-Styles**. Bibl Nutr Dieta. Basel, Karger 1990:45

Fürst Elisabeth, Prättälä Ritva, Ekström Marianne, Holm Lotte, Kjaernes Unni (eds). **Palatable Words**. Sociocultural Food Studies. Solum. 1991.

Kjaernes Unni, Holm Lotte, Ekström Marianne, Fürst Elisabeth, Prättälä Ritva (eds). **Regulating Markets, Regulating People**. On Food and Nutrition Policy. Novus Press. 1993.

Feichtinger B, Köhler B (eds) **Current Research into Eating Practices**. Contributions of Social Sciences. AGEV Publication Series 10. Suppl. Ernährung-Umschau 42:1995

Methodology

Methods applied in the Finnish studies vary from qualitative field research and quantitative surveys to reanalysis of consumption statistics or content analysis of written documents. It is difficult to single out typical methodological features or schools within the Finnish food research. The Finnish researchers seem to avoid concentrating on only one methodological tradition and often cross the borders between quantitative (natural scientific) and qualitative methods.

Because of the broad methodological basis the materials of the studies vary. Socio-cultural dimensions of food and eating have been analysed with the help of food advertisements, newspaper articles, nutritional education materials, essays written by high school students, consumption statistics, household budget surveys, committee reports and food and nutrition policy papers.

Subjects of the Finnish food studies have represented occupational groups, farmers, blue collar or white collar workers and also people who have lost their jobs or who do not belong to the active work force like teenagers. Social groups where the members are in continuous social interaction have not very often been targets of the Finnish studies. More often, especially in the quantitative surveys, large samples have been drawn and the analyses have been carried out in subgroups; gender, social class, age, place of residence etc. Only a few studies have been carried out among patient groups (see Pyörälä 1996). Most of the studies have focussed on individuals not on families, households or larger social groups or subcultures.

Studies concentrating on pictures, films, historical documents, and also on ethnic and minority groups are few in Finland.

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Analytical categories

Depending on the educational background of the researcher the studies have analysed different aspects of eating. Sociologists have not analysed nutrient intake. The other analytical categories, foods, dishes, meals and meal patterns have been used by both nutritional and social scientists. During the 1980s most studies were dealing only with foods, today the researchers pay attention also to the other analytical levels, especially to meals.

In addition to food behaviour there are studies dealing with ideas, knowledge and cultural attitudes and their associations with food behaviour.

Themes

Most Finnish studies have concentrated on some of the four themes: 1) change and 2) variation in food habits, 3) ideas of healthy/good food, 4) description or evaluation of food and nutrition policies. In addition, there are reviews on the history of nutritional sciences and on connections between the nutritional and social sciences (Räsänen 1986, Falk and Gronow 1985, Riska 1993).

1. Sociocultural dimensions of dietary change

Dietary changes have been analysed with the help of consumption statistics (Ilmonen & Pantzar 1986), dietary surveys, ethnological studies and other documents ((Prättälä & Helminen 1990, Gronow 1995, Prättälä & al 1992). Most studies have concentrated on changes taken place in Finland during this century. Differences or similarities between Finland and other European countries have not been systematically and empirically analysed, although international trends have been discussed (Gronow 1995, Ilmonen 1991).

2. Socio-cultural variation in food behaviour

Gender and social class differences in food behaviour have been the target of several studies in Finland (Roos E, 1995, Kleemola & al 1996, Karisto & al 1993, Roos G 1995). This tradition has a parallel in public health research: many Finnish sociologists and medical scientists have carried out studies in social class differences in mortality, morbidity, risk factors and health behaviour.

Approaches of class and gender studies have, in addition to public health research, obtained ideas and models from qualitative sociology and anthropology.

3. Knowledge, cultural attitudes, ideas in relation to food

Food related ideas of cultural attitudes have been analysed by both quantitative and qualitative methods. Associations between knowledge and behaviour, have been in the interest of researchers with training in educational sciences (Palojoki 1995) whereas cultural attitudes, ideas of healthy, good tasting or proper foods and meals have been the domain of sociologists (Mäkelä 1995, Gronow 1995, Falk 1991).

4. Nutrition policies

The use of milk fats versus vegetable fats has received much attention in Finland. Successes and failures of nutrition policy and contradictions between agricultural and health policies have been a topic of research for both social and public health scientists. There exists historical analyses on butter and margarine consumption and advertising in Finland (Viinisalo 1993, Pantzar 1992), and reviews of policy documents (Murcott & Prättälä 1993, Räsänen & Prättälä 1988).

Special features of Finnish research

The Finnish society changed rapidly after World War II. Urbanisation and increasing standard of living influenced food selection, womens roles, work outside home and life style. In the early 90s the economic upward trend turned into a deep depression. The great social changes have changed food behaviour and attitudes towards food in Finland.

Finnish sociologists, nutritionists and public health scientists have naturally been interested in the social changes and their consequences to life style and health.

Despite the great socio-economic changes the Finnish culture has been rather homogenous. There are few ethnic minorities and only during the last 5-10 years migrants coming from Africa, Asia, Southern and Eastern Europe have become visible in Finnish cities. Thus, it has hardly been possible to do research on food behaviour and attitudes towards food among ethnic minority groups in Finland.

Traditions of scientific communities have influenced themes of research. Department of Nutrition was established in the University of Helsinki in the 1940s among the first ones in Europe. Finnish nutritionists have had close connections with epidemiologists and medical sociologists. These connections have directed research towards health inequalities and dietary risk factors of cardiovascular diseases.

Within Finnish sociology research on life style/ way of life and the tradition of cultural studies have influenced orientations. P. Bourdieu, G. Simmel, M. Douglas, C. Levi-Strauss and D. Silverman are names cited by Finnish sociologists doing research on food.

A majority of Finnish studies - the main theme of the research change, variation, ideas or nutrition policies food - have paid attention to dietary fats. In Finland dietary fats have been an interesting topic of study for sociologists, nutritionists and epidemiologists.

3. National activities to change food behaviour

The first Finnish nutrition committee was set up by the Ministry for Agriculture and Forestry in 1936. Its task was to consider activities that would improve public health by healthy nutrition and that would promote the production of healthier foods in Finland. To change food behaviour of Finns the committee recommended not only nutritional education but took into account price policies, agricultural production and food industries.

Since the first nutrition committee, matters related to food and public health have been in Finnish policy discussions. Various committees, councils and working groups have tried to find a balance between health and agricultural policies. General interest in nutrition and health care issues grew significantly in the 1970s. By 1987 the National Nutrition Council published the dietary recommendations accepted both by the public health and agricultural interest groups. The recommendations were followed in 1989 by suggestions for implementating them. The 1989 report includes recommended measures for production and marketing food, legislation, monitoring, pricing, catering, nutrition education and research.

In order to follow the implementation of the recommendations the National Nutrition Council suggested a national nutritional monitoring system. The monitoring started as a 3-year project in the National Public Health Institute in 1995. The project is funded by the Ministries of Social Affairs, Agriculture and Finance. According to a recent Nutrition Policy reports "implementation of the nutrition policies is still at the early stages...the main problems appear to be lack of coherence in policy-making and deficiencies in systematic planning".

4. Position of socio-cultural food research

4.1. Nutrition and public health research, sociology

Since the mid-seventies the Finnish nutritionists and public health scientists have discussed problems of changing food behaviour. In several committee reports and conference proceedings, research on social and cultural determinants of food behaviour has been named as the field which requires funding. During the last 20 years the Academy of Finland has had an active role in nominating committees, organising scientific conferences and distributing research grants for the field. The first long term research projects started in the early 1980s. Research projects funded by the medical and agricultural boards of the Academy have been practically and empirically oriented.

In the 1970's and 80's the Finnish sociologists published occasionally theoretical articles on food. Larger projects including empirical studies were started in the 1990's. Some of them received funds from the social scientific board of the Academy of Finland.

During the last 20 year the Finnish sociocultural food research has experienced a growth both in quantity and quality. Conference papers and review articles written in the 1970s and 1980s have been followed by larger empirical projects with a theoretical background.

Socio-cultural food research has been reasonably well funded by the Academy of Finland and other typical sources used by Finnish nutritionists. The greatest problem in regard to position of this field of food research has not been the quantity but the temporary nature of monetary resources. There are no professors or lecturers in the Finnish universities specialized in sociocultural food research. There is a short course in nutritional anthropology in the two Nutrition Departments in Finland (University of Helsinki, University of Kuopio). They are taken care by temporary teachers or by professors who are responsible of other fields of nutritional sciences.

4.2. National nutrition society

The Finnish nutrition society is biochemically oriented. The field of sociocultural food research is recognized and communications on social nutrition have been accepted and invited to the annual conferences of the society.

The society for Social Medicine in Finland
Nutritionists interested in sociocultural food research have been active in the society, and there is a section of food research like sections of medical sociology and behavioural medicine. The section organises meetings and conferences and distributes occasionally a newsletter. The Finnish Journal of Social Medicine has been an important forum for publications of the field.

4.3. Nutrition and health policy

The importance of sociocultural food research has been stated in several health and nutrition policy reports and reviews. A recent example of this is the WHO health policy review published in 1991 (Health for all policy in Finland, 1991). In the report one chapter evaluated Finnish food and nutrition policies. The evaluation concluded that "Monitoring of equity in access to nutrition information, in food distribution and in the cost and availability of healthy diets to different social, ethnic and age groups, sexes and geographical areas, seems to have been relatively neglected. In addition, the evaluation of the impact of policy measures to reduce inequity would furnish valuable information for policy purposes. . . This means that multidisciplinary research, integrating the social, political and nutritional sciences is needed. Topics would include the development of the social epidemiology of nutrition, by monitoring and understanding trends and variations in food consumption and eating habits, particularly the differences between socioeconomic groups."

The need of research is clearly understood among health and nutrition policy planners. However, the expectations on results of socio-cultural food research might be too high. If the goal of research is to find new means to change food behaviour, sociologists, political scientists, historians and other specialists in policy analysis are probably not interested in reaching it.

5. Priority areas of socio-cultural research on food and nutrition

The great social and cultural changes in the European region have consequences on health, life style and food behaviour of Europeans. There is a need for methods and approaches which are sensitive to changes in food behaviour and its determinants and also suitable for comparisons between the countries.

National studies on food behaviour, cultural attitudes towards food as well as on nutrition and food policies should be used as points of departure for international comparisons. As a first step, analyses of existing data sources for different types of studies are needed.

In comparative studies at least the following three approaches can be used:

1. Monitoring food related lifestyles

Some European countries have already started programmes for national health behaviour monitoring. The surveys often include questions of food. The existing surveys could be used more effectively.

Example:

a) Use of foods with a public health relevance (high-fat, high-sugar products, vegetables etc...)

Are trends similar in all countries?

Are class and gender differences similar in all countries?

b) Meal patterns in Europe

Meal schedules and work schedules, is there an association?

How does unemployment influence food habits?

c) Ideas of healthy food/meals in Europe

2. Marginal groups, "new" poverty in Europe

Marginal groups are difficult to reach by surveys. Response rates among those who have the greatest economic, social and health problems (and among migrants with language problems) can be very low. To understand food behaviour and ideas of food in minority groups, small scale (qualitative) studies are better than surveys.

Example:

-Soup kitchens in modern Europe. What kind of persons (life style, health, food behaviour and preferences, ideas of food etc...) receive food aid?

3. Social science research on food and nutrition policies.

Critical and continuous evaluation of food and nutrition policies, comparisons between the European countries.

Example:

-Milk fat vs. vegetable fat

How far do the interests of public health conflict with those of agricultural production? What is the role of nutritional and medical scientists - their political, professional and institutional allegiances, the funding of their employment and of their research - in shaping food and nutrition policies? (see Murcott and Prättälä 1993, in Kjaernes et al).

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