

## Survey and surveillance of nutrition behaviour, a developing research area

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### **The scientific issues**

Nutrition behaviour is a complex process. It is influenced by biological, psychological, socio-economic, -demographic and -cultural, as well as home-economics-related factors and is shaped by the individual situation (Gedrich 2003). Known for its potential detrimental impact on nutritional status and health, behavioural research is interested in understanding and explaining people's nutrition behaviour. However, the practical use of nutrition behaviour models for intervention programs requires besides quantitative also qualitative baseline data. Such qualitative information about the prevalence and variation of dietary habits within and across populations and subgroups thereof, are relatively scarce. This may be the result of limited interest by the more technical/natural science-oriented nutrition research community in behavioural questions, and – as a consequence or a cause – may be due to a lack of experts in the field and limited financial resources. In the present issue of “SPM: International Journal of Public Health”, the editors have provided for the first time a much-needed platform for researchers in qualitative nutrition behaviour. Qualitative nutrition behaviour assessment is shown to be exploratory, i.e. descriptive, thus helping to identify and guide intervention priorities. The information gathered here highlights a large diversity of nutritional behaviours across countries, regions, and populations, which do not necessarily represent the most commonly studied ones. In particular, the articles by Rossi et al. (2005) and Kruseman et al. (2005) show the increasing importance of supporting nutrition behaviour research in countries in transition and for vulnerable population groups, such as refugees or migrants, who have left their known socio-

cultural environments without being able to settle completely in a new one. Only an open scientific forum and practical exchange of experts from various disciplines will allow for successful development and validation of assessment tools, their use for nutrition behaviour monitoring, and implementation of well-targeted interventions as defined by national nutrition policies. Even in non-transitional European countries much more interdisciplinary nutrition behaviour research is needed, since behaviour-related problems may (further) increase in the future (Oltersdorf 2003), as indicated by the studies about nutrition behaviours of migrants in Geneva, Switzerland (Kruseman et al. 2005), and of Finnish (Kosonen et al. 2005) and Italian (Tripodi et al. 2005) youth. Winkler and colleagues (2005) have responded to this need by presenting how an effective nutrition education initiative can be built onto the results of health monitoring data.

### **The political issues**

A few weeks ago a European-wide survey was conducted by the Italian Research Institute for Socio-economic Science to evaluate the potential impact of the perception of the current economic situation in five European Union partners (Italy, Spain, Germany, France, UK) on the lifestyles of European citizens (CENSIS 2005). The survey points out that one third of interviewed people in Spain, UK, and Germany, and up to 62 % of Italians reported that they have altered their expenses by saving money to modify their food choices within their available budgets. It is worth remembering that the context is the five wealthiest countries in Europe, all of them members of the G-8, the eight-member council of the most

economically powerful countries of the world. This observation indicates that nutrition behaviour is very sensitive to social changes even when these changes are not dramatic, and where everyday life is relatively comfortable for the vast majority of the individuals in the society.

In principle, surveillance of nutrition behaviour can result as an important and useful tool for the monitoring of the society lifestyle. The consequent reflections are both scientific and political.

Improvements of the research instruments and of the quality and possibility to generalize the results are a major priority for developing the scientific approach to nutrition behaviour. In addition, resource allocation in this field should be at a high priority level for central or local health governmental bodies in all European countries. Every system providing

public and/or private health and social services could rely on a very sensitive indicator of behavioural risk of the inherent communities. The magnitude and priorities of societal interventions to promote lifestyles conducive to health could be modulated through this monitoring action.

This special issue on nutrition behaviour offers an opportunity to authors and interested readers to set up or enlarge their network of interdisciplinary nutrition behaviour researchers, allowing new or less experienced researchers to benefit from expert knowledge and strengthen (inter) national and interdisciplinary cooperation. Our hope is that this stimulus may also garner needed attention from public health and, more generally, political actors.

**Sigrid Beer-Borst and Salvatore Panico**

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