

# Changing Eating Habits: An International Comparison



Questions of sustainability and food are usually posed in terms of the environmental and social impacts of food production—or, at best, include issues of distribution and waste. Often overlooked are the habits and routines that affect what, and the way, people eat. Analysing how habits change, how they are tied to social rhythms and cultural conventions, clarifies the possibilities and pitfalls of intervening in eating practices. The research explored two instances of change. First, through interviews with 14 Anglo-French couples on both sides of the Channel, we studied the mutual adjustment of eating habits in couples where the partners originate from different culinary cultures. Second, through 60 interviews with the groceries' promoters, associates and customers, we examined changes in shopping and eating practices resulting from new forms of provision provided by community grocery shops in rural Scotland and France.

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## Insights

- | Quite dramatic changes can take place with regard to what is actually eaten. For example, French respondents relocating to England have a tendency to reduce their consumption of meat. However, wholesale changes are rare. This is because eating habits are not discrete occurrences, but embedded in the contextualised patterns of everyday life, including factors such as forms of sociability associated with different eating events (lunch vs. dinner) and contrasts between weekday and weekend routines. Although perhaps suppressed for a time—such as when a new partner's lifestyle is embraced wholesale—patterns tend to reappear because other contextual factors remain unchanged.
- | Cultural conventions play a particularly important role in reproducing eating habits. This is most starkly revealed by contrasting UK and French lunchtime practices. Conventions of sociability around eating and drinking, especially in the family and extended family, but also with friends, are also difficult to alter.
- | Despite the social stakes of non-conformity being high, the research showed that some people do adopt new conventions. In these limited cases it was those with a specific interest in environmental issues where changed habits could be identified.
- | In some instances people indifferent to environmental issues did change some habits in ways supporting more sustainable eating patterns. The provision of a new shop with a non-conventional supply and personalised service in France had just such an effect, although a similar scheme in Scotland did not. This can be explained by the more radical change in shopping routines required in the highly commercialised context of Scottish food retailing when contrasted to that of France, where use of the new shop resembled more an extension of, than a rupture to, existing shopping routines.

## Significance

- | Long-term change in eating habits is a complex process, which results from a combination of social factors: new social circles; new awareness of food-related rationales (such as health or sustainability); new personal relationships; or a new phase in personal relationships. All of these factors may suddenly strike a chord with latent dispositions, for example in conversion to vegetarianism. Nevertheless social relations, and the cultural conventions and collective rhythms of one's particular social circle or community, are crucially determining factors of eating habits.
- | New provisioning facilities, like the community shops in our case studies, appear to have a role more directly related to the promotion of sustainable food as a concern and topic of interest. In particular a key lesson from our research is that reviving local retailing, as a profession, appears to be a way for non-conventional local food networks to become accessible, especially in low income areas where options are otherwise limited.



## Implications for Policy and Practice

- | Habits are often presented as single and discrete—each habit being separate from every other. Such an understanding encourages approaches that seek to isolate 'a' habit and identify one or two factors (whether attitudinal or environmental in form) to be altered, so as to provoke change. This understanding of habits underpins 'nudge' approaches, but change in eating habits is nothing like a mechanical response to changed circumstances.
- | This research shows that habits are always related to each other in dynamic patterns that are shaped and configured by multiple factors and rationales associated with eating practices. New rationales, such as 'sustainability' or 'health', are unlikely to completely transform these patterns. At best, they may become one amongst several rationales that come to be associated with some of the contextual factors that shape eating habits.
- | Our findings also show that social relationships matter crucially. So too do certain turning points in life, for example becoming a parent may evince a different rationale. However, we also find that people may return to past habits in such moments of transition—life turning-points do not necessarily result in the adoption of entirely new habits. Equally, long-term exposure to new social and cultural contexts may induce gradual conversion.



### Research Team

Alan Warde and Isabelle Darmon  
(University of Manchester)

**Contact: Prof. Alan Warde**, +44 (0)161 2753630

Alan.Warde@manchester.ac.uk