



# Newspaper debates on milk fats and vegetable oils in Finland, 1978–2013: An analysis of conflicts over risks, expertise, evidence and pleasure



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## ABSTRACT

The study analysed public debates on the association of milk fats, vegetable oils and cardiovascular diseases (CVDs) between 1978 and 2013 in Finland, a country with a decades-long history of public health initiatives targeting fat consumption. The main agendas, conflicts and participants were analysed. The data were collected from the newspaper *Helsingin Sanomat* and consisted of 52 threads and 250 texts. We identified four themes around which there were repeated, often overlapping conflicts: the health risks of saturated fats, expertise of the risks of fat consumption, the adequate evidence of the risks of fat consumption, and framing the fat question. During the research period, the main arguments of the effects of consumption of fats have remained the same. References to epidemiological and intervention studies and framing of the fat question as a public health issue, have been ongoing, as has the definition of what constitutes genuine expertise. Yet, we also found discontinuities. In the early 2000s new emphases began to emerge: personal experiences were increasingly presented as evidence of the effects of dietary choices on human health, and the question of fat consumption was framed either as one of enjoyment or of a consumers' right to choose rather than only being a public health question. Moreover, new professional groups such as chefs and creative professionals now joined the discussion.

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## 1. Introduction

In many western countries, including Finland, dietary fats have been a recurring subject of debate for several decades, both in academic and policy forums and in the media (Pantzar, 1995). The present study analyses public debates on the association of dietary fat intake and cardiovascular diseases (CVDs) between 1978 and 2013 in Finland, a country with a long history of public health initiatives targeting fat consumption. We analyse how the arguments for and against milk fats and vegetable oils have been justified and defended, what conflicts were involved, and who took part in the debates. The study shows that in many respects there have been ongoing themes, yet in the early 2000s new emphases began to emerge.

Historically, the debates on dietary fats have revolved mainly around economic and health issues. Butter has been an important agricultural product in Finland since the late nineteenth century (Kokko & Räsänen, 1997). After the Second World War butter was heavily subsidised to counter the competition from a cheaper product, margarine, and benefitted from its image as a natural product and its association with affluence (Pantzar, 1995). However, since the 1950s, when fat consumption was implicated in the aetiology of cardiovascular diseases (CVDs), the debate on dietary fats has been dominated by public health issues. A diet rich in saturated fats together with cholesterol were deemed the main culprits in clogging arteries. Several randomized controlled trials as well as community intervention studies, such as the renowned North Karelia Project in Finland, attempted to prove the beneficial effects of dietary modification and cholesterol reduction (Oppenheimer, Blackburn, & Puska, 2011), but only trials with statins, a novel type of cholesterol-lowering drug introduced in the 1980s, submitted proof that was considered sufficiently robust by a majority of those in the international research community (Garrety, 1997). Parallel with these developments, nutritional

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recommendations setting target values for fat consumption were formulated amidst industry lobbying in Europe and the USA (Jensen, 1994; Mills, 1992; Nestle, 2007). In Finland, the National Nutrition Council endorsed the reduction of total fat consumption and the replacement of animal fats with vegetable fats as early as the late 1950s. These principles were later included in the guidelines, such as the proposal for a Finnish Food and Nutrition Policy in 1978 and, since 1987, in national nutrition recommendations (Kokko & Räsänen, 1997.) Monitoring data collected from the 1970s onwards has shown a parallel trend in consumer preferences, as butter was replaced by vegetable oil products (Jallinoja, Kahma, Helakorpi, Niva, & Jauho, 2015) and serum total cholesterol and systolic blood pressure and coronary heart disease mortality declined (Jousilahti et al., 2016).

Thus, at the start of the period under study in this article there existed an emerging consensus among public health officials and the establishment of internal medicine over the health risks of fat intake. However, despite this relative agreement, dietary fats and cardiovascular diseases have remained in the public eye and under debate in Finland and elsewhere. Health and illness are newsworthy issues, and novel findings regarding the link between fat/cholesterol and cardiovascular problems are often reported, especially if they go against the prevailing consensus (Goldberg & Hellwig, 1997; Lupton, 1994; Walsh, 2014). For example, in recent years, advocates of low-carbohydrate diets have gained media publicity by highlighting so-called fast-burning carbohydrates as the main dietary culprits and favouring animal fats as the healthy option (Knight, 2012; Gunnarsson & Elam, 2012; Jauho, 2014).

We chose to analyse the debates on dietary fats in a single publication, *Helsingin Sanomat* (hereafter HS), the largest and oldest subscription newspaper in Finland and published in the nation's capital. Although a majority of the subscribers live in the metropolitan area or in southern Finland, the newspaper is widely read throughout the country. In 2007, 62% of Finns reported that they read HS at least now and then (Purhonen & Research team, 2014). Even with decreasing circulation, from a peak of 483,000 in 1992 to 313,000 in 2013 (personal communication from HS, 13 August 2015), HS is still the leading independent newspaper in Finland and wields substantial influence in raising issues for public discussion; hence, the paper has influence beyond its regular subscribers and readers (Wiio, 2006).

The study period 1978–2013 was chosen because it allows reflection on the changes in fat consumption, analysed in another subproject of the research consortium, “Fat in food, fat in bodies – Diversification of ideals and practices in healthy eating”, with a yearly population survey conducted since 1978 (Jallinoja et al., 2015). Moreover, as explained above, in the late 1970s, the debate within the scientific community over the risks of consuming fats was for the most part settling down and becoming concrete through national nutrition recommendations and health-promoting interventions (Kokko & Räsänen, 1997). The present study covers the period of the emerging scientific consensus on dietary fat intake and explores the controversies that later challenged this consensus. Previous studies on public debates about dietary fats have focused on comparatively short time periods in Australia (Lupton, 1994) and Finland (Huovila, 2014; Syrjäläinen, Ryyänänen, Heinonen, Jauho & Jallinoja, 2016). The present study covers the years 1978 through 2013, and hence, allows us to analyse changes in the debates over time.

### 1.1. Risks, consumers, experts and the media

Several authors have analysed the anxiety-ridden nature of human food consumption (e.g. Bildtgård, 2008; Fischler, 1992; Sassatelli & Scott, 2001). Others have pointed out that, especially

in recent decades, there has been heightened concern about health issues, leading to consumers' repeated attempts to regulate their lifestyles (Crawford, 2006). In late modern societies, the notion of risk has become central, and the importance of traditional ways of eating and the shared sustenance of local communities has diminished (Bildtgård, 2008; Giddens, 1991), replaced by constant choices made available to concerned consumers (Giddens, 1991; see also; Blue, 2010). Torbjörn Bildtgård (2008) distinguishes between modern societies, where trust is placed in organizations and their representatives and research organizations, and late modern societies, in which consumers are faced with increasing amounts of scientific information and new value bases (such as economic and environmental concerns), leading to the need to weigh different values and forms of knowledge vis-à-vis one another.

Regarding the media, the modern situation generates a plethora of new subjects in which ambivalence and anxieties about food risks prevail, including such matters as excessive intake of nutrients (Lupton, 1994) and applications of biotechnology in food production (Sassatelli & Scott, 2001). Claude Fischler (2002) suggests that these tensions continue to build as consumers are faced both with the benefits of modern products and the worrying contents of those same products (see also Beck, 1994). Taking part in the debates on these risks, the mass media has become an important arena for creating credibility for science and influencing public opinion and political decision-makers (Väliverronen, 2001).

The modern situation of reflexively choosing a subject (Bildtgård, 2008; Giddens, 1991) and the demonopolization of expertise (Beck, 1994) is reflected in journalism practices. Firstly, the role of lay people, i.e. people without established professional expertise in the area, has become more significant in science publicity. Harry Collins (2014) refers to the concepts of “lay expert” and “experienced experts”, meaning the various roles played by lay people in science and technology debates. An analysis of Dutch non-fiction medical television programmes between 1960 and 2000 shows a phenomenon called “layification”, which is visible in the decreasing amount of speaking time allotted to experts, while the time allotted to lay people has increased (Verhoeven, 2008).

Secondly, professional groups, other than scientific experts, have gained increasing visibility in health- and food-related debates. For example, in publicity about obesity in Finland several types of actors are apparent: scientists, members of the lay public, sports personalities, politicians and a new category, field experts, who include nutrition therapists, sports instructors and personal fitness trainers (Setälä & Väliverronen, 2014). Recently, chefs and other culinary personalities have also positioned themselves as experts, and not only on aesthetic matters, but also as public intellectuals commenting on public health (Johnston & Baumann, 2015).

Within this nexus of various actors, interests and media publicity, the study examines the debates on dietary fats and their changes in a major Finnish newspaper by identifying the main issues and those who took part. By exploring these questions, we analyse the continuities and discontinuities in the arguments, provide answers to the questions of why and how the risk of dietary fats has remained a debated issue for several decades and how different groups of actors have responded to and taken part in the changing debates. Of special interest to us is how expertise has been depicted and debated throughout the decades and how established sources of expertise have reacted to new topics that challenge their position and its justifications.

## 2. Material and methods

The data were drawn from the archives of Sanoma Ltd, the

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