



Research report

Lifestyle constraints, not inadequate nutrition education, cause gap between breakfast ideals and realities among Japanese in Tokyo[☆]



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ABSTRACT

Japanese public health nutrition often promotes 'traditional' cuisine. In-depth interviews with 107 Japanese adults were conducted in Tokyo from 2009 to 2011, using free-listing methods to examine dietary ideals and realities to assess the extent to which realities reflect inadequate nutrition education or lifestyle constraints. Ideal-reality gaps were widest for breakfast. Most people reported Japanese ideals: rice and miso soup were prototypical foods. However, breakfast realities were predominantly western (bread-based). While those aged 40–59 were more likely to hold Japanese ideals ($P = 0.063$), they were less likely to achieve them ($P = 0.007$). All those reporting western ideals achieved them on weekdays, while only 64% of those with Japanese ideals achieved them ($P < 0.001$). Partial correlations controlling for age and gender showed achievement of Japanese ideals were positively correlated with proportion of cooking-related housework, and negatively correlated with living standard and income. Ideal menu content was in line with current Japanese nutrition advice, suggesting that more nutrition education may not change dietary ideals or behavior. Participant-reported reasons for ideal-reality discordance demonstrate that work-life balance issues, especially lack of time and family structure/life rhythm, are the largest obstacles to the attainment of dietary ideals. People reporting 'no time' as a primary reason for ideal-reality gaps were less likely to achieve their Japanese ideals (odds ratio = 0.212). Time realities of people's lives may undermine educational efforts promoting Japanese breakfasts. When dietary reality/behavior departs from guidelines, it is often assumed that people lack knowledge. If ideals are in line with dietary guidelines, then lack of knowledge is not the likely cause and nutrition education is not the optimal solution. By asking people about the reasons for gaps between their ideals and realities, we can identify barriers and design more effective policies and programs to achieve dietary ideals.

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Introduction

The long life expectancy of the Japanese (Ikeda et al., 2011) has been attributed in part to the Japanese diet (Cockerham, Hattori, &

Yamori, 2000). Trends toward westernization of dietary lifestyles have driven concerns about effects on public health, agricultural self-sufficiency, and the decline of Japanese food culture. These prompted the passage of the *Shokuiku* (food and nutrition) Basic Law in 2005, and associated goals and activities (CAO, 2012c; Watanabe, 2010) that often promote well-balanced meals based on 'traditional' Japanese cuisine (i.e., miso and rice) with the addition of nutritionally-recommended items such as salad (Fig. 1). Japanese traditional breakfasts are high in protein (from fish, soy, and egg), vitamins and minerals (from *wakame* seaweed, tofu, and vegetables) and low in fat, and are believed to be healthier than 'western' breakfasts (which in Japan usually consist of bread, with the addition of meat, eggs or dairy products). *Shokuiku* aims to improve dietary choices through food and nutrition education in the general population, and many promotion activities focus on children in schools (Adachi, 2008).

Public health professionals often assume that behavior departing from health/nutrition guidelines results from shortcomings in

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individuals' understandings and knowledge, and lack of consensus between health professionals and laypeople is common (Farmer, 1999; Weller, Baer, de Alba, Garcia, & Salcedo Rocha, 2012). The public's understanding of health-related problems tends to be less biomedical and scientific, with individuals more often focusing on the constraints arising from daily life and their cultural beliefs. Once the latter are addressed, compliance with recommendations often improves dramatically (Farmer, 1999), suggesting that greater attention to constraints identified by laypeople may hold keys to effective public health and nutrition policies.

A research technique known as cultural domain analysis has been used by medical anthropologists to explore people's understandings about diseases such as AIDS (Trotter et al., 1999), cancer (Chavez, Hubbell, McMullin, Martinez, & Mishra, 1995; Chavez, McMullin, Mishra, & Hubbell, 2001), diabetes (Weller et al., 1999, 2012), asthma (Pachter et al., 2002) and the common cold (Baer et al., 1999), as well as intra- and inter-cultural recognition of and definitions of risk (Weller & Baer, 2001). Our study applies this method to questions about diet and nutrition. In order to better understand people's dietary choices and their antecedents, we asked each participant to create a freelist (with content and order decided entirely by the participant) of associations with their ideal (*risou*) meals (breakfast, lunch and dinner), and then to complete the same exercise for associations with their actual/real (*jissai*) meals. If the preponderance of responses described well-balanced Japanese meals – the choices recommended by the *Shokuiku* program – that would suggest that the program's efforts were unnecessary or misdirected. Large gaps between ideals and realities, and the stated reasons for them, might suggest more effective approaches. Thus the objectives of this research were to understand the cultural models (D'Andrade and Strauss, 1992) underlying people's eating behavior (by asking about ideals), and to examine ideal-reality differences by age and gender, in order to identify effective public health nutrition policies and approaches.

Much research on breakfast focuses on breakfast skipping or meal frequency and its correlates, primarily among western populations (Hallstrom et al., 2011; Pearson, Biddle, & Gorely, 2009; Reeves, Halsey, McMeel, & Huber, 2013). This paper expands the focus from actual behavior and dietary intake to examine ideals of breakfast to assess factors contributing to ideal-reality gaps in an adult Japanese population. Research questions were: (1) What are the ideals and realities of breakfast, and how do they differ? (2) To what extent are ideals and realities of breakfast Japanese or western? (3) What factors influence the differences? (4) Is eat-

ing behavior that departs from current *shokuiku* guidelines due to lack of nutrition knowledge or lifestyle constraints?

Methods

Study design and participants

These analyses derive from a larger study of dietary lifestyle approved by the Ethics Committee of the National Institute of Health and Nutrition (Japan). The population was a convenience sample of Japanese adults aged 20–80 living or working in the Tokyo metropolitan area. Participants were recruited through community centers, corporations, daycare centers, schools, and local businesses. Recruitment and interviews were conducted from 2009 through 2011, and the original study design aimed to interview equal numbers of men and women in the following age groups: 20–30s; 40–50s; 60+, but due to the professional relocation of the authors, enrollment ended before equal numbers of each group were recruited. All interviews were conducted face-to-face in Japanese, and each took approximately 1.5–2 h.

Sample demographics

Structured interviews were conducted with 107 people aged 20–80 years old. Demographic characteristics of the population are shown by gender and age categories in Table 1. Males had higher income levels, but self-rated living standard and economic conditions showed no significant gender differences. Incomes peaked in the middle age category (40–50s), with a significant decrease after age 60, the mandatory retirement age in most workplaces in Japan. Women's spouses (i.e., males) worked more days per week than men's spouses (i.e., females). Men spent more time at work and commuting than women (about 1.5–2 times). Females spent 4–5 times more hours per week on kitchen related chores and about 3 times more hours per week on housework compared to males in all age groups. Males smoked at higher rates than females. Women spent a greater proportion of days on cooking-related cleanup during the week ($P = 0.002$), and on food shopping on the weekend (trend, $P < 0.1$). Cooking division of labor was highly correlated with age (χ^2 , $P = 0.002$), with 85% of people aged 60+ reporting 'wife' as primary cook, compared to 45% of those aged 20–39 reporting 'other'. Almost all participants provided meal content responses (84.1%, 89.7% and 80.4% for Ideal, Real-Weekday,

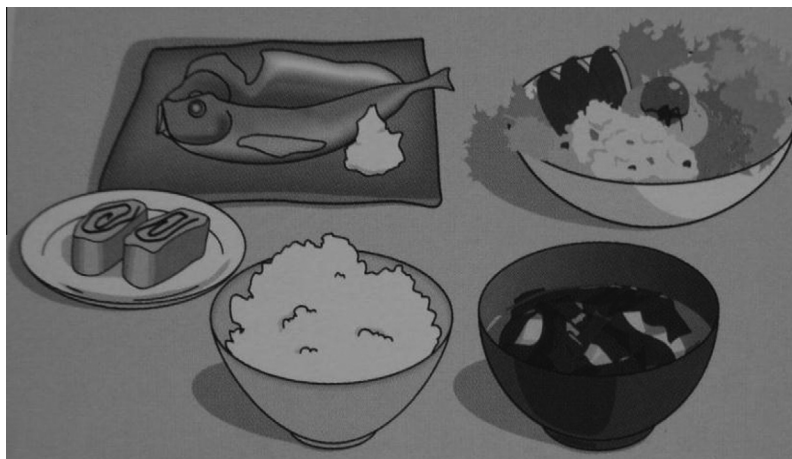


Fig. 1. Image of ideal breakfast (Hayane Hayaoki Asagohan Zenkoku Kyogikai, 2012) (Early to bed, early to rise, breakfast guide) Clockwise from bottom right: miso soup (fermented soy bean paste containing wakame seaweed and tofu cubes); white rice; rolled omelet; salted grilled fish with grated daikon radish on the side; salad bowl containing lettuce, cucumbers, mini-tomatoes and potato salad (a more recent addition to breakfast, replacing more traditional pickled vegetables).

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