



Research report

“If I drink it anyway, then I rather take the light one”. Appropriation of foods and drinks designed for weight management among middle-aged and elderly Finns[☆]

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ABSTRACT

This article examines everyday ideals of eating for weight management as described by middle-aged and elderly Finns with varying experiences of managing their weight. The paper draws on the theoretical approach of appropriation and looks at the meanings, understandings and use of foods for weight management in the context of the practices of eating. The article is based on an analysis of eight focus group discussions with 68 people (47 women, 21 men, aged between 38 and 77) conducted in Helsinki in autumn 2009. The findings of the study suggest that lay understandings of foods suitable for weight management rest not only on simple measures such as energy, fat and sugar, but also on a complex set of generalised food ideals. These include a conflict between foods described as natural against artificial, moral judgements of the necessity of foods designed for weight management, and the overall emphasis on moderation as a basic ideal. The results indicate that people employ two perspectives in assessing foods suitable for weight management: in the context of the whole of diet the products are dismissed as unnecessary, but in specific situations they can replace ‘normal’ products if the latter are deemed more harmful.

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Introduction

In contemporary societies, food and eating are filled with anxieties related to health, well-being, and particularly to weight. With increasing public health concerns related to overweight and obesity, people of all sizes are encouraged to reflect on and control their weight (Gracia-Arnaiz, 2010). In an ‘obesogenic’ environment that encourages the use of energy-dense, convenient and palatable foods (Gracia-Arnaiz, 2010; Wadden, Brownell, & Foster, 2002), ‘weight control’ and ‘weight management’ have become buzzwords for a self-controlled, disciplined relationship to the body. Apart from ‘managing’ their weight, many people diet in order to get slimmer. In Finland, a 2009 population survey showed that 36% of working-age women and 22% of working-age men had tried to lose weight during the previous year (Helakorpi, Laitalainen, & Uutela, 2010). In this article, we use the term ‘weight management’

to refer to efforts to maintain the current weight, whereas slimming refers to striving for weight loss.

According to many studies, people are relatively well aware of the principles of healthy eating that support weight management (e.g. Holm, 2003a; Margetts, Martinez, Saba, Holm, & Kearney, 1997; Niva, 2008; Paquette, 2005). However, research also shows that putting this knowledge into practice in everyday eating and food choices is problematic. First, health advice and nutrition guidelines may be challenging to reconcile with everyday life with its social and work-related commitments, time constraints, food traditions and taste preferences (Ely, Bafort, Banitt, Gibson, & Sullivan, 2009; Holm, 2003a). As Ristovski-Slijepcevic, Chapman, and Beagan (2008) have suggested, people’s ideas of healthy eating draw on various kinds of cultural and traditional, nutritional as well as ethical discourses. Official health advice and nutrition guidelines are only one, albeit important element in this whole. Second, the generic advice is targeted for ‘average’ people and does not easily take into account individual nutritional needs or skills. Third, for non-experts it is challenging to estimate calorie or nutrient contents of foods let alone meals. Studies have shown, for instance, that people easily overestimate the calorie contents of ‘disreputable’ foods with unhealthy images and underestimate the calorie contents of ‘reputable’ foods with healthy images (Oakes, 2005; see also Carels, Harper, & Konrad, 2006; Carels, Konrad, & Harper, 2007). Meanwhile, the market with expanding varieties of foods with

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differing nutritional contents and increasingly detailed claims on their health benefits, presumes people to be watchful and invariably concerned with nutrition and health aspects of food.

Much social research on weight focuses on barriers and motivations for weight control (e.g., Andajani-Sutjahjo, Ball, Warren, Inglis, & Crawford, 2004; Teixeira et al., 2002; Wammes, Kremers, Breedveld, & Brug, 2005), but there is also increasing emphasis on experiences of weight loss (Nielsen, 2008; Stinson, 2001) as well as on the experiences of social stigma of fatness (e.g. Harjunen, 2009; Rice, 2007). Research focusing on judgments of food healthfulness has also been conducted, particularly quantitative studies by Oakes and Slotterback (e.g., 2001a, 2001b, 2001c, 2002; Oakes, 2003) on how people rate the healthiness of different types of foods including high-energy and low-energy foods. These studies have indicated that lay evaluations of healthiness are closely related to ideas of how foods affect weight. They have also suggested that people generally find low-fat foods more healthful than high-fat foods (e.g., Oakes, 2003) and that consumers' evaluations of healthiness based on food name (e.g., apple) and based on the nutrient contents of the food (e.g., amount of calories, fat, fibre, etc. in an apple) differ considerably even though they correlate positively (Oakes & Slotterback, 2001c). Curiously, Oakes and Slotterback (2001b, 2001c) found that particularly fruit and vegetables are evaluated healthier when the judgement is based on their name than when based on their nutrient contents. In contrast, in a study by Aikman, Min, and Graham (2006) the participants' evaluations of healthiness of foods based on pictures and on nutrition labels on foods did not correlate.

More recently, quantitative research has been conducted on how people see different foods from the perspective of their effect on weight (Carels et al., 2006, 2007; Oakes, 2005; Provencher, Polivy, & Herman, 2009). Oakes (2005) found that people's ratings of the propensity of different kinds of foods to promote weight gain were closely related to the images of the healthiness of the foods. In his study, a very small portion of an unhealthy snack (chocolate bar) was rated as more weight gain promoting than a large portion of healthy snack (cottage cheese, carrot and pear), even though in reality the latter contained as much as ten times more energy than the former. Similarly, in a study by Carels et al. (2006) the respondents' ratings of healthiness and of the contribution to weight loss were very close to each other. The study (Carels et al., 2006, 205) indicated that "participants may consider 'healthfulness' and 'capacity for weight change' to be similar constructs". These and other studies suggest that fruit and vegetables and other relatively little processed foods such as fish, yoghurt and beans are considered both healthy and weight-reducing in contrast to energy-dense foods with unhealthy images such as hamburger, ice-cream or pizza (see Carels et al., 2007).

Despite including some qualitative characteristics, the research mentioned above is mostly quantitative and focuses on perceptions of food from the perspective of healthiness and/or weight loss and weight gain. Currently there is a lack of qualitative research that would throw more light on how exactly the notions of healthiness and weight management interact in lay perspectives on single foods. In this article, we examine lay notions of the role of different food products in weight management and their interconnection with ideals of healthy eating by analysing focus group data generated in connection with a Finnish research project on weight management.¹

¹ The study was part of a multidisciplinary project "Consumers on the weight management market" (KULUMA, 2009–2011) that analysed daily choices and experiences of food products related to weight management, and aimed at understanding the factors which increase the motivation for a change in behaviour. The project was carried out in cooperation by six universities and research institutes in Finland and was funded by the Finnish Funding Agency for Technology and Innovation (Tekes), universities and research institutes as well as eight Finnish food companies.

The analysis makes use of the concept of appropriation, which has served as a theoretical concept primarily in anthropology (Miller, 1987), sociology of consumption (e.g. Sassatelli, 2007), and social studies of science and technology (e.g. Lupton & Noble, 2002; Mackay & Gillespie, 1992), and has more recently been used in studying the ways in which people adopt and reject functional foods (Niva, 2008). Appropriation can be divided into conceptual and practical appropriation: the former means the ways in which people make goods their "own" conceptually, i.e., adopt, reflect on and argue for them; whereas the latter refers to the use and presence of goods in everyday food practices (Niva, 2008). When appropriating goods, people often want to 'singularise' them (Kopytoff, 1986), i.e. personalise the goods by adding to them something that differentiates them from other, similar goods (e.g. adjusting computer's visual settings, decorating garments, seasoning ready meals). This singularisation makes the goods a more identifiable and familiar part of consumers' everyday life.

This article focuses particularly on the conceptual appropriation of foods in weight management by identifying (1) what kind of foods lay people regard as suitable and unsuitable for weight management, (2) how their suitability and unsuitability are accounted for and (3) how ideals of weight management and healthy eating are linked with each other. We look at the participants' interpretative perspectives, meanings and understandings related to various foods and their characteristics, the comparisons made between different foods, and the role of single foods in weight management. Taking into account these aspects also highlights the situational factors involved in lay appropriation of foods for weight management. They help us to understand why people may criticise foods designed for weight management as a category, but nonetheless consume the products under certain circumstances.

Method

The data were collected in eight focus group discussions held in late 2009. Saturation was achieved in the eight discussions, i.e., the interpretative perspectives and meanings that emerged in the later discussions were very similar to those in the earlier ones. The 68 participants were members of a Consumer Panel maintained by the National Consumer Research Centre, and living in the metropolitan area of Helsinki.² The panellists were invited to take part in a group discussion on weight management and asked to register as participants by filling in a web-based recruitment questionnaire. In the invitation letter, it was emphasised that everyone with or without experiences of weight management is welcome to participate in the study.

As we assumed that people would feel more comfortable discussing something as personal and body-related as weight management (Harjunen, 2009) with individuals of their own gender, we formed separate groups for women and men. In addition, we wanted to facilitate an open discussion by creating a 'common ground' for the participants through differentiating the groups based on weight loss experiences and current efforts in weight management. Six of the groups consisted of people trying to lose weight and two groups of people not trying to lose weight. Henceforth, these groups are referred to as weight-loss groups (WLGs) and weight-maintenance groups (WMGs). In five discussions, there were only women (four WLGs, one WMG) and in two only men (both WLGs). Due to the small number of those trying to maintain their weight, in one WMG there were both women and men. However, it is to be noted that our focus is on the variety of perspectives

² The Panel is a register of around 1000 voluntary citizens who are willing to take part in the studies of the NCRC. As such, it is not a representative sample of Finns but a group of people who share an interest in consumer issues (Pulliainen, 2009).

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