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Young Norwegians' food choices, healthy eating and weight control: Commentary on the *Food: Now and Then* report

As in many other countries, young people's food habits have been a central issue in the Norwegian public debate in recent years and many interested parties have been participating in the debate.

If we look more closely at how young people and their eating habits are portrayed by politicians, researchers and opinion leaders, they are typically being portrayed as rebellious and troublesome. One example of this is the following front page from Norway's largest newspaper: 'Norwegian children and young people are fat and lazy' (VG February 14th 2007). This claim was based on the fact that children and young people exercised less than before and ate more unhealthy food. To what extent do such claims square with empirical data: Is it true that young people generally eat unhealthy food? And is it true that young people do not care what they eat or drink? And how do Norwegian studies correspond with findings in the British report *Food: Now and Then* (SHEU, 2012).

Attitude and action

In the *Food: Now and Then* report, it is questioned whether young people "really" are considering their health or just saying what they think is right. The dataset showed clear correlations between health considerations and healthy eating. This also appears in various Norwegian studies (Bugge, 2010; Bugge, 2011; Bugge & Lavik, 2012). As an example, almost all young people expressed knowledge of the dietary advice that one should eat five servings of fruit and vegetables daily. However, on average, the Norwegian participants only ate 2.7 servings daily (Bugge & Lavik, 2012). A popular interpretation of such findings is that there is a discrepancy between people's attitudes and what they actually eat. Nevertheless the SHEU study showed that those who expressed interest in healthy eating had the highest eating frequency of fruit and vegetables. This study also showed that young people who were concerned about healthy eating had a lower intake of fizzy drinks, chocolate, snacks etc. All in all, Norwegian studies support the SHEU report's conclusion that opinions about food and eating have an effect on behaviour.

Increasing interest in healthy eating

From the SHEU report, it emerges that most young people considered their health when choosing food, at least sometimes. More females than males responded (very) often or always. Norwegian studies show that young people have become increasingly concerned about having a healthy diet (Bugge, 2010; Bugge, 2011; Bugge & Lavik, 2012). More than half of the young stated that they were interested in healthy eating. Males were, however, far less concerned with this than females. The most important motivational factor for healthy eating was to achieve good health. The young people scored higher, however, than adults on motivational factors such as good looks and avoiding overweight.

Young people's preferences and priorities

On the question about what was important when buying food, young people scored much higher on low price/cheap products than the other age groups. Seven in ten young people said this was particularly important. Six in ten emphasised that the food was healthy. Females were far more concerned with the health aspects when buying foods than males.

Surveys show that, among young Norwegians, eight in ten indicated that they

preferred to avoid foods and drinks high in sugar, while six in ten said the same about foods and drinks high in fat (Bugge & Lavik, 2012; Bugge, 2012).

Fast food was found to be much more appealing among young people than adults (Bugge, 2010). 43 per cent expressed a preference for hamburgers and similar dishes. In the age group 40-59, the figure was 13 per cent. However, much has changed since hamburgers were introduced in Norway in the 1980s. From the responses of the young informants, it is evident that the food-cultural status of such foods is becoming increasingly problematic.

Many positive development trends in young people's diet

With regard to the many negative descriptions of young Norwegians' eating habits, the results that emerge in various studies are quite surprising. In later years, we have seen many positive results (Bugge, 2010; Bugge, 2011; Bugge, 2012; Bugge & Lavik, 2012). For example, there has been a significant reduction in the consumption of fizzy drinks, and a considerable increase in the consumption of water. Furthermore, we have also seen an increase in consumption of fruit and vegetables. Still, there are many young Norwegians who, despite health authorities' advice, have a far higher intake of chocolate, sweets, sweet pastries, salty snacks, fast food and fizzy drinks.

Healthy food is in vogue

As in the SHEU report, Norwegian figures show that young people have a much higher consumption of meat than fish. Furthermore, it emerges that young Norwegians also have a significantly lower frequency of eating fish than adults. The exception is salmon. Over the last decade, however, sushi has become a popular dish among young Norwegians. Its popularity must be seen in light of the growing interest in healthy eating. The younger age groups had a significantly higher frequency of eating sushi than the older age groups (Bugge, 2012).

Smoothies were also introduced to Norwegians during the last decade. Today, the product is largely marketed to health conscious young consumers. The figures clearly show that smoothie is primarily something that appeals to the younger age groups. Young people have a

significantly higher consumption of this than the older age groups (Bugge, 2012).

Gender differences

Similarly to the British report, several Norwegian studies show that female's and male's eating habits are rather different (Bugge, 2010). There are, for example, many differences in what girls and boys are eating during the school day. Far more females than males drink water and eat fruit and vegetables (salad) for lunch. There are also far more girls who eat yoghurt or whole grain crackers. Conversely, far more males drink fizzy drinks and ate sweet pastries and fast food during the school day.

Attitudes to personal weight

Norwegian studies show that being healthy and slim are ranked highest on the youth's popularity (status) scale (Bugge, 2010). The fact that the value of a slim and healthy body has escalated among young Norwegians are also supported by findings in several studies (Bugge, 2012).

According to Norwegian statistics, 15-20 per cent of young Norwegians are overweight or obese. However, studies show that many more (53 per cent) of the young stated that they had too much body weight. Furthermore, there were as many as 71 per cent who said they were trying to get a leaner body. The Norwegian studies thus correspond with the SHEU report: Many young people seem overanxious about their weight. Furthermore, it seems that many people who are within the normal BMI target are dieting (Bugge, 2012).

Conclusion

Norwegian studies of young people's eating habits show a much more optimistic picture than the impression created in the media. Furthermore, we see that the Norwegian studies are also consistent with recent British studies of young people's food choices.

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