

Potential for change in food habits in the United Kingdom population

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One of the definitions of 'potential' given in most standard dictionaries is 'existing in possibility, but not as yet in reality'. In terms of an assessment of the possible ways in which food habits may be changed in the future in the interests of better nutrition, this is a pretty fair summary. To date, food habits have not changed to any extent as a result of health requirements, but there is a significant possibility that they may be changed to this end in the future.

This is not of course to suggest that for a multiplicity of reasons food habits have not changed to any extent in the past; there have for example been fairly dramatic developments both in the substance and style of food patterns in this country since the war. Thus if we look at the total food consumption per head in the United Kingdom over the last 10 years we find significant changes (Table 1).

Table 1. *Food moving into consumption in the United Kingdom (kg/head per annum)*

	1965	1975
Cheese	4.6	6.3
Poultry, rabbit, game	7.9	11.6
Fish (fresh, frozen and cured)	7.8	6.1
Eggs (no.)	250	232
Wheat	70.4	64.3
Tea	4.1	3.5
Coffee	1.3	2.2

Again if we look at meal patterns we find that within the last 20 years there have been significant changes, for example in the breakfasts we eat. In 1956, 47% of adults ate a cooked breakfast, today this figure is less than 20%.

Twenty-five years ago tea bags had not yet been introduced and frozen foods comprised only a small market. Today, the 'tea-bag' market is worth over £50 000 000/annum and the 'frozen-foods' market is worth over £350 000 000/annum.

Equally, it is doubtful that there would be much argument if it were suggested that food habits will continue to change in the future.

Where the problem really arises is in the capacity of the scientists to influence these changes in the direction of improved nutritional status and consequent better health. Attempts to develop change and influence intake to support the 'dietary goals' referred to in detail by Truswell (1977), are bound to be full of difficulties.

However, my concern in this paper is to suggest that should we seek to harness change for nutritional purposes in the future, our chances of success should be considerably better than they have been in the past.

The 'do-it-yourself' food change guide

To begin with it might be worth summarizing a set of 'basic rules' or at least guidelines which have been built up over the last few years as various groups have attempted change and which would now appear to be necessary prerequisites to success. These are:

(a) Since for a multiplicity of reasons consumer food habits are changing of their own volition, any recommendation which recognizes these changes and works with them is more likely to succeed than one that attempts to go against them.

(b) If one can identify consumer attitudes and needs and their ramification on future choice, then there should be opportunities to devise appropriate new products that take cognisance of these criteria and reflect that climate.

(c) If real changes have to be recommended, then if these can be concealed within existing food patterns (e.g. the fortification of bread, or the reduction of the fat content of milk) this is by far the best way.

(d) If to deal with the problem actual food habits need to be changed, then it is essential to analyse what is likely to be the effect on over-all behaviour patterns, food habits and cooking procedures, and the extent to which the social and economic framework will require change.

(e) Every attempt must be made to work within the current environment and to avoid out-right clashes with the existing fabric of society or its food patterns.

(f) Government regulations in terms of import controls, price manipulation and rationing will be of great importance if fundamental changes are required.

(g) It is essential to ensure that products are available on shelf in the shops at a price that can be reasonably afforded.

(h) It is equally necessary to ensure that the approach is viewed and marketed as a realistic commercial operation.

Improved understanding of the bases of change

What has been said so far is really a straightforward summary of current thinking and experience rather than an identification of anything new and original. This is simply because growth in fundamental knowledge is a slow business. However, what is very rapidly evolving in knowledge terms is our underpinning of most of the criteria to which reference has been made, i.e. a detailed analysis of consumers, their patterns of behaviour and the criteria which influence their choice.

In consequence, it may be argued that the commercial food industry is becoming a good deal more effective in achieving success. This may be justified by the fact that 84% of new products launched nationally in 1974 are still on the market today (Kraushar, Andrews & Easie Ltd, personal communication).

In part this may be attributed to a greater level of caution; the costs of launching

a new product are so great that most are now checked in small test markets before they reach the national market. And in consequence, failures are often isolated at an earlier stage.

But this is not the whole story. In part, at least, the basis for the improved success rate lies in the growing recognition that to succeed one has to have an understanding of the consumer as much as of the particular product to be launched. This has led to very detailed examinations of the consumer by the commercial world. The following are examples.

Perhaps there is no place better to begin than with the economic crisis of the last 2 or 3 years. Certainly this took most food manufacturers by surprise and led to a very detailed analysis of the housewife and how she was behaving. In some fields, such as the consumer 'durables', purchase decisions were deferred. Respondents simply kept their television, or piece of furniture, or car for an extra year.

However, in a crisis, people still have to buy food, but often they turn to different items. This is simply because as budgets are squeezed, more money has to be found for items that can not be constrained, for example rent, rates, electricity, gas. As such, the pressure is very much on the grocery budget. It is perhaps, therefore, not surprising to find that between 1973 and 1976 there was a decline in such 'in-essential fripperies' as 'dietary' bread (42% decrease), pastry mixes (40% decrease), and complete meals (29% decrease). Conversely basic essentials such as flour (23% increase), pastes and spreads (18% increase), and cereals (7% increase) flourished (Ramsbottom, 1977).

By a detailed examination of such changes we can begin to understand consumer behaviour patterns. Thus for example it has been possible to identify the steps by which the housewife may constrain her purchase of a particular brand or type of product (Fig. 1) (Ramsbottom, 1977).

Material such as this helps us to predict behaviour of the consumer in the short term. But longer-term basic trends in food patterns may very well be dependent on

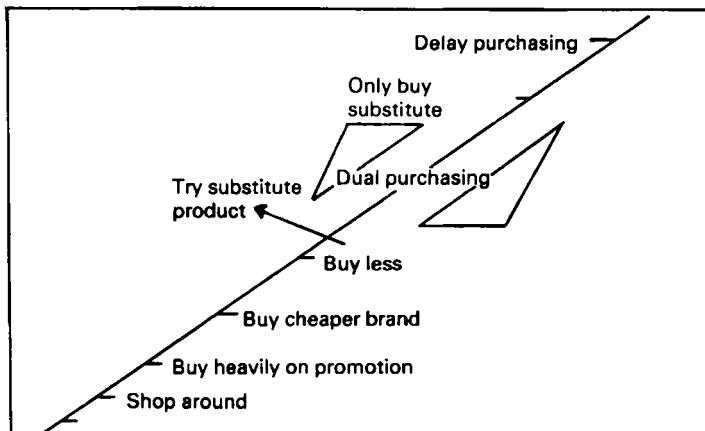


Fig. 1. Modification of purchasing behaviour (after Ramsbottom, 1977).

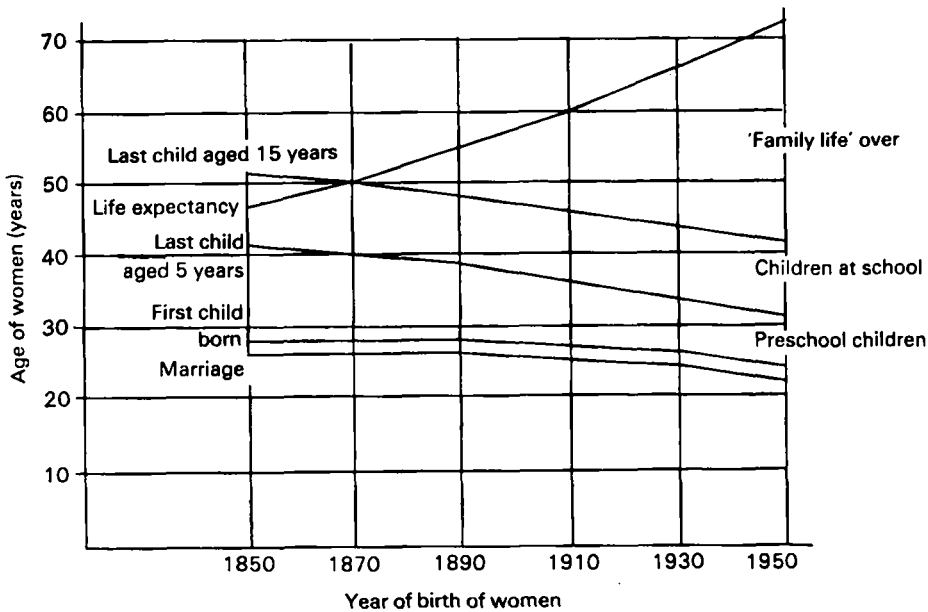


Fig. 2. Changing position of women resulting from the decrease in the size of the family, age of women at childbirth and increase in life expectancy of infants (based on the expectancy at the age of 1 year to eliminate the main effects of infant mortality). Estimates based on reports of Registrar-General (J. Walter Thompson Ltd, 1976).

the profile of the community: the size of family, the age-distribution within the family, the nature of the jobs held by the various members of the family and the proportion of women who are working. In particular the changing position of women resulting from a decline in the size of the family, the age of women at childbirth, and their attitudes to work, has had a profound effect on our over-all life-style. This may be demonstrated by Fig. 2. It will also help to explain the variations in the proportion of married women of different age groups at work in 1951 and 1971 (Fig. 3) (J. Walter Thompson Ltd, 1976).

Again it should not be suggested that now that our total population is virtually static that our society is not a dynamic one. This could hardly be the situation when in each year the following occur: 800 000 births take place (half being first-borns); 600 000 teenagers leave school; 4 000 000 people change their jobs; 1 500 000 people move home.

Food patterns will be influenced not only by all these changes, but by the domestic equipment we possess. In 1950 only 6% of households had a washing machine; today the corresponding figure is approximately 75% of households. Even less had a refrigerator whereas today there is over 80% ownership. Today, 40% of households have a food mixer and 28% of households have an electric toaster; items of equipment almost unheard of 25 years ago.

There is also another area of fundamental importance to be considered. Future behaviour will not be entirely based on the sort of developments so far identified; rather it will be manifestly influenced by attitude dimensions at the widest possible

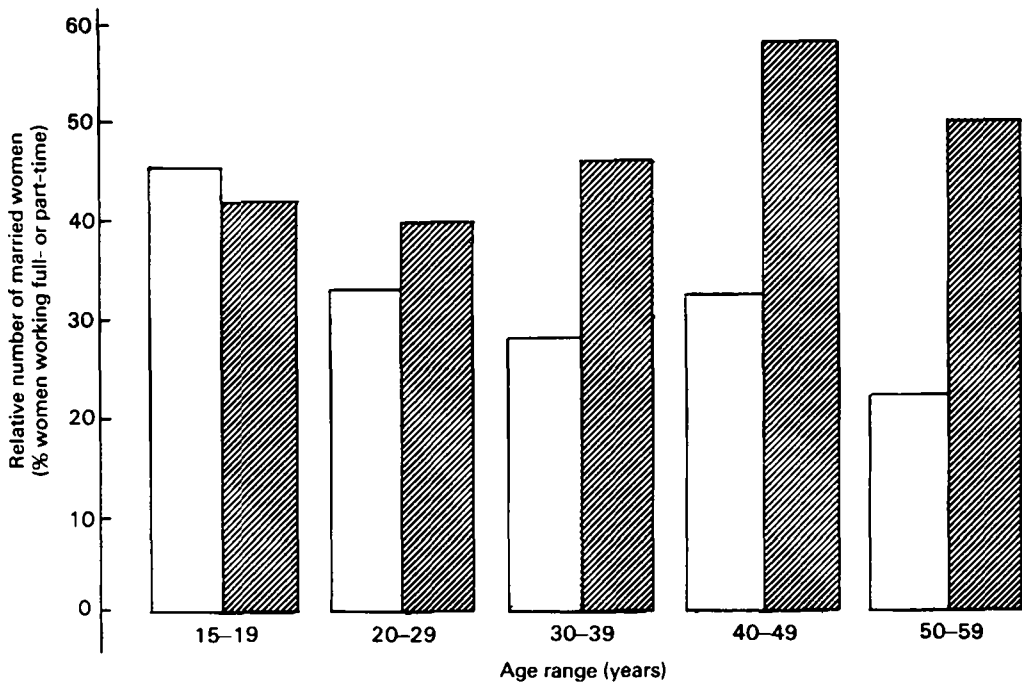


Fig. 3. Comparison of the relative numbers of married women in the United Kingdom (% women working full- or part-time) who were at work in 1951 (□) and 1971 (▨).

level. And here, it is believed, it is possible to isolate three underlying themes of direct relevance to future food patterns (McKenzie, 1976).

The first theme suggests that the consumer will become increasingly involved with knowledge (not necessarily accurate) of nutrition and medicine and related matters (Fig. 4).

The second theme is based on a growing division in attitude-terms between foods for nourishment and foods for fun, with resultant ramifications on food choice (Fig. 5).

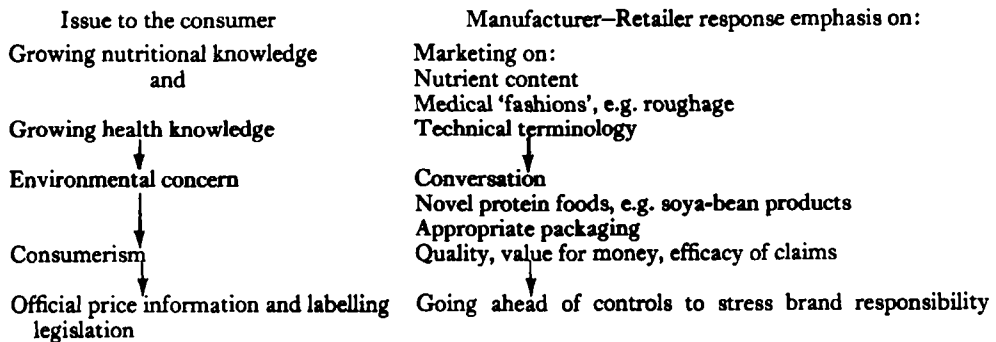


Fig. 4. Trends in information and knowledge of nutrition and medicine and related matters.

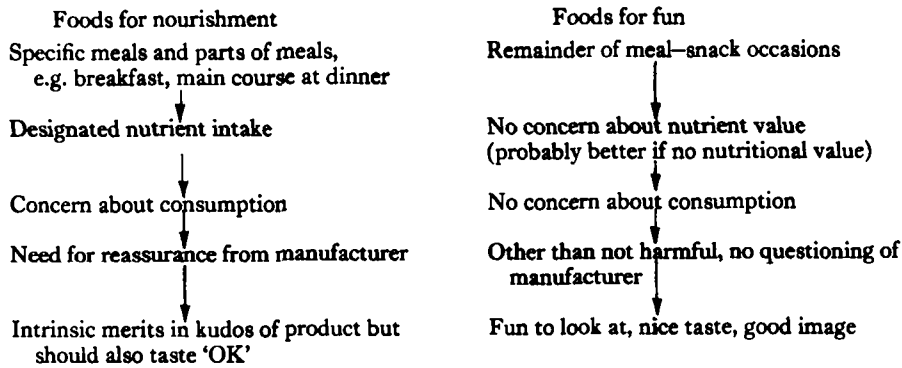


Fig. 5. Trends in food perception.

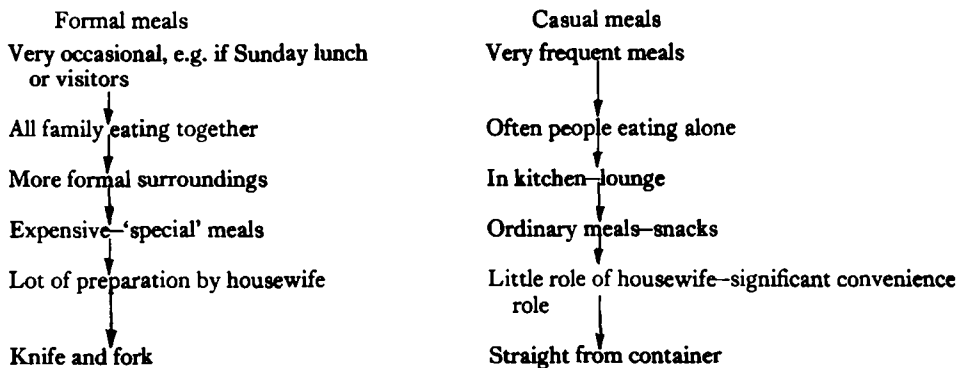


Fig. 6. Distinction between formal and casual meals.

The third theme suggests a growing distinction between formal and casual meals (Fig. 6).

Armed with varied information of the sort given in this paper food manufacturers have become much more efficient at both predicting long-term food trends and isolating new products to satisfy growing needs.

Conclusions

All this information suggests not only that food habits will be changing over the next few years, but that we have the potential to influence change in the interests of better health and nutrition should we so desire.

But, regrettably, this paper cannot end on quite such an optimistic note. In order to influence food choice we must have clear policies to pursue. Unfortunately, I have yet to be convinced that either the nutrition—medical world, or the government is likely to accept the responsibility of deciding what the desired nutritional parameters for the 80's should be.

On the one hand, as a body, the academic nutritionist and clinician has to be made to realize that decisions on nutrition policies will have to be based on 70 or

80% levels of scientific certainty rather than waiting for 100% proof (this is of course with regard to foods to be avoided, not in any reduction of the screening stringency for new foods or additives). On the other hand, government may have to take controversial and unpalatable decisions; nothing of their attitude to date with regard to the cigarette industry suggests that they will easily take such decisions.

Yet if these decisions were to be made I am certain that the food industry would be only too happy to respond to new guide-lines; given a reference point for desired goals, they would rapidly direct their skills to creating an appropriate product range and selling it to the consumer.

Perhaps it is only if bodies like the Nutrition Society and the British Nutrition Foundation take the responsibility for identifying these fundamental guide-lines for nutrition and lobbying the government to force action, that we shall be in a position to ensure that potential for future changes is moved forward to a state of healthy actuality!

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