

**Food is cultural, eating is social –
Comparative evidence on European and American attitudes
to food, eating and nutrition**

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Most approaches to improving diet have been based on trying to measure *how much* and *what* is eaten by individuals – a very difficult task altogether. I present evidence that *how* the food is eaten plays an important part among the determinants of food intake : by this I mean the cultural context of eating, *i.e.* implicit, collective, culture specific rules and categories applied to food and eating.

Recent data from comparative surveys on attitudes (N=7000, six countries) and on time use and activities in relation to well being (N=1600, Columbus, Ohio and Rennes, France) suggest that societies with a highly individualized, as it were de-socialized, relationship to food, may be more susceptible to obesity than other cultures with a strong emphasis on sociability and shared pleasure. Such is of course the case of the United States in contrast, in particular, to southern European cultures. Our data show that Americans tend to consider food and eating as an individual, personal issue – rather than a collective, social one – and equate food with nutrition and health. In contrast, Italian interviewees consider freshness and quality of foodstuff essential, while French respondents, while sharing the concern about quality and taste, emphasize what they call « conviviality », *i.e.* the social aspects involved in, and structuring, the experience of eating. Germans are collectively divided (East vs West), and often individually torn apart, between a strong sense of collective, festive *Gemütlichkeit* ("*einmal im Monat richtig schlemmen mit Freunden in der Gaststätte*") and a sincere will to apply rules of good, healthy nutrition.

Consequences for public health policy might lead to further reconsider approaches aimed at *individuals* as it appears they might paradoxically contribute to disorganize traditional food systems, thus producing more adverse than positive results. It might instead prove beneficial to try and modify behaviour by acting upon the environment. Physical availability of food, size of portions are one aspect ; another is of a social nature and consists of traditional, culturally regulated eating patterns. A strong emphasis not just on nutrition but also on taste and quality would probably balance the guilt and absence of enjoyment associated with strict nutritional guidelines.