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Anne Lhuissier

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# Diet, weight-loss and the lower class : what determines the reception of dietary information?

A. Lhuissier

INRA, UR1303 ALISS, F-94205 Ivry-sur-Seine

Contact: lhuissie@ivry.inra.fr

## Objective

The survey aims at understanding the ways women appropriate dietary information within nutrition education groups. The hypothesis is that information is not evident to implement : the study captures the modes of handling nutritional information in two contexts : in group sessions when participants and educators interact, and in the domestic environment where other members of the household intervene.

## The action

- Nutrition education groups for poor and obese women in Northern France
- 15 women per group
- The action takes place in community centres which recruits most of the participants
- Free participation, but with a compensation : a questionnaire on the health of the participants

Precepts of the action :

- advice toward way of life (food habits and physical activity)
- to be autonomous when starting a diet
- 3 topics are presented in 12 classes :
  - nutritional education (dietician)
  - physical activity
  - the fight against *cognitive restriction* (psychologist)

## Fieldwork

### Participant observation

- all the classes of 2 groups during 12 months
- all the meetings of the educators

### In-depth interviews (2003-2006)

- participants of the action
- women who participate to other actions on food consumption and cooking

Conjugal status	
lonely women	12
lonely women with children	7
couple without child	4
couple with children	8
Women's job situation	
working	4
retired	7
disablement pension	9
unemployed	2
other allowances	5
Any income nor allowances	2
allowance to bring up child	2
Men's job situation	
unemployed	4
temping	1
working	7

## Many dissonances between educators and participants

The study highlights that educators and participants interpret differently the initial information. These different levels of reading lead to a gap, even to an incomprehension between the former and the later in terms of objective and expectations :

### Educators

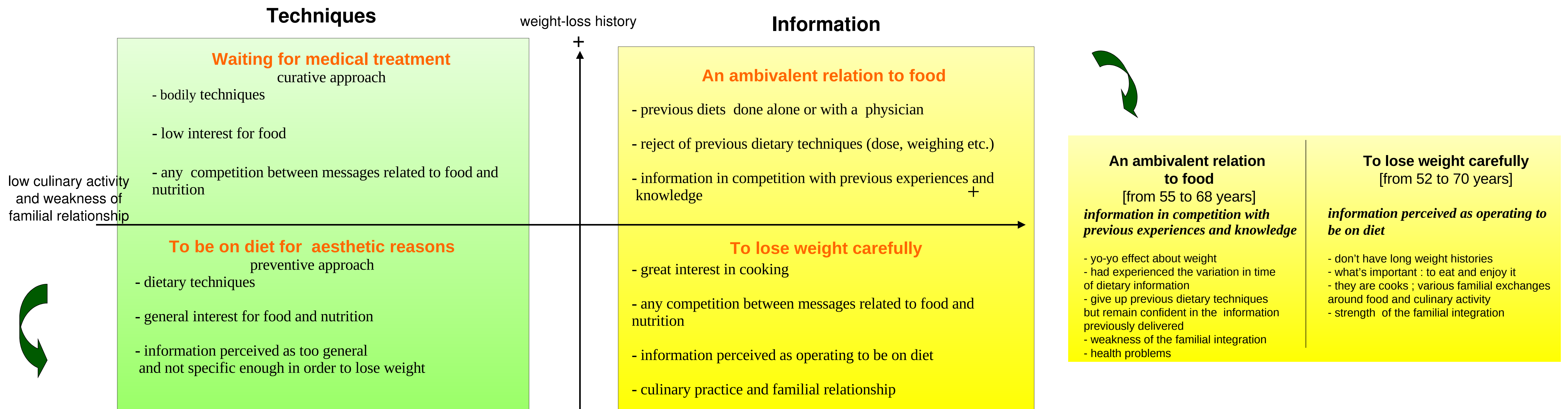
- They have to deal both with the general objective of the National Plan on Nutrition and Health, the regional situation in terms of health (and obesity) and the participant expectations :
- if obesity is the general objective of the National Plan on Nutrition and Health, the educators aim in fact at fighting child obesity.
  - their objective, *i.e.*, food habits modification in the long-time, is opposed to what women expect, *i.e.* immediate weight-loss.

### Participants

They feel that :

- there is a substitution of an individual weight-loss plan for a set of new familial food norms
- discourse which concerns much women in their status of mother than in their social status
- they don't find the information precise enough nor restrictive in order to weight-loss.

## Different ways to understand nutrition information



Waiting for a medical treatment	To be on diet for aesthetic reasons
[from 30 to 50 years higher BMI]	[from 29 to 53 years lower BMI]
<i>external interventions on the body</i>	<i>Interventions on and by the food habits</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- lower classes</li> <li>- illness is seen as an accident and has to be resolved by tablet</li> <li>- obesity is not an illness, but has to be resolved by medical means</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- qualified and employed</li> <li>- stage in the professional career</li> <li>- intend to visit a doctor rather than staying in the group</li> <li>- other participants seen as ugly</li> </ul>

Well-known opposition between lower classes/upper classes towards the link between health, body and food (Boltanski 1969, 1971)

### Techniques or information ? Differentiate approaches and expectations

- to be on diet : women share its definition as restrictive , but have various expectations of what is should be in their case. These differences are linked with:
  - weight-loss and diet history
  - food in everyday life, and more precisely the culinary practice (related to familial integration)
- Two ways to start a diet :
  - in terms of techniques (in order to reach a result)
  - in terms of information (communication or reception of knowledge)

## Discussion

- The notion of diet is not univocal (unlike its definition in most statistical surveys) and refers to the ways to do (or not) which don't necessarily suppose to change food habits.
- In order to understand the reception and appropriation of the normative message, we should focus on :
  - different scales of observation, *i.e.*, the whole interaction (inside and outside the class) which change the initial information.
  - all the individual experiences linked to the weight, the body and food, with regard to the individual's biography.
- More generally, it should be interesting to focus on the other experiences of food and culinary learning. The question of the ways to pass on information, especially from generation to generation refers more particularly to familial history (what's has been passed on, what women want to pass on etc.), weight history (who gives advice on food at a given time), and more generally to education. Within a social group that seems homogeneous (women from popular classes), we observe great differences according to the familial trajectory (social mobility) and individual trajectory (strength of familial relationship). This result should be deepen with a comparison with women from other social background.

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