

Rapid Review of 'Moments of Change' and Food-Related Behaviours

Research programme: Behaviour and perception
Conducted by: Cardiff University

Background

Whether, and how, food behaviours develop across an individual's life course and change in response to changing circumstances is important to understand because there may be points at which shifts to healthier behaviours can be promoted or shifts towards less healthy behaviours can be prevented. The focus of this rapid evidence review is on how safe, healthy and sustainable food behaviours are influenced by moments of change.

Aims and objectives

The overall aim of the rapid review was to synthesise all available peer-reviewed evidence for the impacts of moments of change on food-related behaviours including:

- food purchasing
- preparation
- consumption
- waste
- sustainability

The evidence base was also evaluated by type of evidence (i.e. qualitative or quantitative, cross-sectional or longitudinal) and subjective relevance of the evidence to food behaviours (i.e. was food-related behaviour change a central focus of the study or more peripheral?).

Results

Most of the evidence focused on food consumption, expenditure and preparation, and there was very little evidence in relation to life changes and food safety, waste and sustainability. However, the review was not exhaustive, and it is not possible to rule out the existence of additional studies. The evidence presented indicates that, for some people, within certain contexts, life transitions carry implications for both positive and negative food-related behaviour change. However, we have pointed out that the diversity and methodological heterogeneity of studies provide little causal evidence for clear behavioural changes. Where differences have been found, these have been more related to food expenditure, consumption and preparation, while little research has investigated life transitions in the context of food safety and sustainability.

Interventions targeting specific moments of change should be tailored to specific groups, as the effects of transitions appear to differ based on factors such as culture, gender, income and age. In addition, while some transitions appear to involve the increasing routinisation of food-related practices (e.g. cohabitation, marriage, parenthood), others are more disruptive (e.g. divorce, children leaving home).

There is initial evidence that diet and some food-related behaviours are susceptible to disruption from moments of change. However, despite the size of the literature base, there is relatively little

coherence in terms of defining how and when food-related behaviour change in response to moments of change might be observed and measured. This raises questions of what counts as a moment of change, as well as when do such transitions begin and end? The multiplicity of changes that make up a life transition and overlap with others, make specific causal agents difficult to determine, particularly if these are additive. Therefore, more research is necessary to give clarity to the field and to advance the theoretical understanding of moments of change. This, along with methodological advances will help to address the large gaps that exist in the literature and to facilitate the implementation of policy and interventions in relation to other relevant life transitions.

Research report

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