A State of emergency: obesity, food culture, health attitudes and lifestyle.
Socio-cultural analysis of the pilot project “Reducing childhood obesity in Reggio Emilia”.

a. Research description

The aim of this research is to analyse and evaluate a pilot project, developed within the wider European project “Co-creation of Service Innovations in Europe” (CoSIE) through sociocultural paradigms as a specific mode of inquiry. The CoSIE project promotes the co-creation of public services, and it entails the active involvement of citizens in public service delivery by creating sustainable partnerships between local authorities and citizens (Voorberg, Bekkers, Tummers 2015). It can further be seen as the voluntary or involuntary involvement of public service users in any stage of the design, management, delivery, and/or evaluation of public services.

The project is executed through the creation of nine pilot sites in Europe using open data and innovative Information Communication Technology (ICT) services. The Italian pilot will be carried out in the city of Reggio Emilia, where the local health authority (LHA) will be responsible for creating services and an Internet application (app) for the prevention of childhood obesity.

b. Theoretical framework

The purpose of the pilot is to address one of the most serious health challenges of the 21st century according to the WHO: childhood obesity. Indeed, in Western countries, a phase of profound demographic and social transformation has substantially changed the structure and composition of the resident population. In addition to its medical implications, childhood obesity represents a salient social issue (Dietz 2001; Korbonits 2008). Being a consequence of obesity and metabolic disorders, it disproportionately affects the most deprived populations and some minorities. Childhood obesity is deeply connected to social and economic factors; obesity is indeed more common among children who come from socio-economically disadvantaged families. This explains why health inequalities are linked to social determinants like education, housing, and lifestyle (Pachucki et alii 2015). Moreover, health inequalities are strengthened by other factors including health care organization and access to healthy food; unhealthy behaviours reinforce these inequalities (WHO, 2014; Brownell 2004). As a result, childhood obesity is associated with a higher chance of obesity, premature death, and disability in adulthood (Broccoli et al. 2016; Morris, Bell, Rolls 2001).
In this framework, sociocultural analysis helps to understand how personal and individual functioning and capabilities are related to the various cultural, institutional, and historical contexts (Alexander, et alii 2012). Obesity is socio-culturally distributed, i.e., the prevalence of obesity is known to vary according to socio-cultural factors, including socio-economic position (SEP), social roles and circumstance, and cultural factors (Crossley 2001; Sobal and Maurer 1999; Benton 1991).

Additionally, the relation between socio-cultural patterns and childhood obesity is complex and associable to sex, age, social networks, and sometimes ethnic groups, as well as type of society, with patterns of relationships observed in developed countries sometimes reversed in developing countries (Sobal 2011; Gritser 2003). However, far less attention has been paid to investigating the potential contribution of socio-cultural factors and to the changes in the socio-cultural environment over time to the current obesity pandemic (Gerald et al. 1994, Ritzer 2000). The mechanisms through which socio-cultural factors may influence body weight and risk for obesity are also not well understood (Foucault 1980). In discussing socio-cultural influences we refer to systems of social relations (roles and relationships that define class, gender, ethnicity, and other social factors) and the meanings attached to these (Alexander et alii eds. 2012; Averett and Korenman 1996; Bourdieu 1984, 1978). For the purposes of this research, we want to focus on the impact of social and cultural systems on individuals' obesity-related behaviours (particularly, on certain social skills, relationship patterns and interpersonal aspects) (Klaczyński et al. 2004; Mintel 2003a, 2003b).

The socio-cultural approach is committed to meaning-centered analysis, but there are different levels of commitment to the idea that culture should be studied as if it is a language with a set of meaning structures or, instead, as a series of relatively nonstructured poetic gestures (Orbach 2001, 1985). This approach is needed to analyse and assess the relationship between childhood obesity, food culture, health habits and health cultures since cultural sociology provides a sensitizing and illuminating hermeneutic that involves and invokes practices, meanings and performances both collective and individual experienced (Alexander et alii 2012). One way of framing childhood obesity and food culture is to talk about pattern as compared with ambiguity; another is to juxtapose structure with event.

c. Goals

The results of data analysis from a research conducted in Reggio Emilia in 2010 showed that 22% of children were overweight (Fabbri, Palomba 2010). These data are particularly troubling because they indicate that obesity is rapidly increasing among young people. Together with CUP 2000, the LHA of Reggio Emilia has developed a series of policies and organizational tools in order
to offer counseling services to families and foster motivation to change, focusing on diet and lifestyle.

The pilot will apply the co-creation model to encourage the target population to achieve successful long-term results. Furthermore, community involvement in defining goals and determining best strategies for intervention will reduce inequalities in health and in health service access, by using the potential offered by ICT in the e-care sphere (Moruzzi, 2005).

The goals are listed as follows:

- **Analysis of the communicative emergencies on the issue “childhood obesity” at international, national and local level.**

  This action research aims at analysing the issue of childhood obesity by adopting the paradigm of cultural sociology in its "strong" version – i.e. analysing meaning as an independent variable of the social sphere. How, when, where and why does the issue arise? Why should we codify it semantically – i.e. through scientific, medical, civic, moral, domestic languages and symbols? What does the issue of childhood obesity symbolically represent? How does it link itself to the indigenous culture of health? What is the relation of the issue with “common sense culture”? In which institutional fields does it emerge?

- **Secondary analysis on data and literature regarding initiatives and projects taking place in Reggio Emilia to prevent and treat childhood obesity.**

  This action research aims at collecting and analysing literature and data that the City of Reggio Emilia processed, alongside public health institutions, through particular projects regarding prevention and care of childhood obesity. Different database providing information on families and children involved in public health programmes are already available.

- **Collection and analysis of data regarding Reggio Emilia institutional network preventing and treating childhood obesity**

  This action research aims at rebuilding the heterogenous nature of the projects and workshops on childhood obesity in Reggio Emilia, with particular interest to the different semantically treatment of the issue from public institutions and private actors, in order to understand if and how different social meanings, elaborated by different social actors, can be integrated in a coherent systems of "health culture" giving rise to specific policies' measures.

  The researcher should possess a broad background knowledge of Cultural Sociology and Communications Studies in order to understand and master a cross-cultural context made up of heterogeneous cultural, representational and communicatives mechanisms.

d. Methodology
Before starting the empirical research, contextual and theoretical analysis will be conducted, including the study of documentations and publications concerning childhood obesity and projects already implemented in the province of Reggio Emilia. The empirical phase of the project will follow a qualitative socio-cultural methodology (Alexander, Smith and Jacobs 2012). To gain a wider understanding on childhood obesity:

- **3 focus group and 15 in-depth interviews with representatives of public institutions and third sector engaged with childhood obesity in Reggio Emilia.**

This action research aims at collecting and processing data on culture and various actions that the different actors involved in system-childhood obesity are progressively elaborating. A specific focus will be given to the conflict, overlapping, intersection, etc. of different health/food culture/body's cultures because on this topic, the sociological perspective on communication and culture studies, should be emphasized.

- **Collection of 15 family life stories - through in-depth interviews to members - and, if possible, of daily parent's diaries. The specific aim is to observe and analyse obese children’ lifestyles, eating habits and social networks (institutional and informal relations, such as relatives, friends, peers, etc.), as well as their parents ’ones.**

This action research wants to rebuild cultures and lifestyles of children and their relatives in the field of nutrition, physical activity, relations with informal and formal networks (relatives, friends, school, sport groups, health area, etc.). The aim is to grasp the genesis and the persistence of this issue in order to understand the reproduction of the lifestyle. Particular attention will be paid to cultural transmission of eating habits and lifestyles in order to understand why obesity is persisting on certain situations (for example: families from southern Italy, with low human, social and economic capital, in particular towards female condition).

According to a sociocultural perspective, the focus groups will provide significant input to understand the functioning and mechanisms operating between families and institutions located in the province of Reggio Emilia, which are involved in their efforts to prevent childhood obesity and the effect of those cultural factors on their lifestyle. It will be crucial to understand the positive qualities and the real impact of the resulted network and the proposed policy initiatives, in order to acknowledge the evolution of the changes occurring in culture of health and food culture.

The aim of the research is to build the capacity of local health services by increasing citizen and community participation in service design and implementation, as well as make obesity services more effective.
e. Research plan activities

The research phases are listed below:

1. **Theoretical framework:** More specifically, the first phase of study will cover literature on communication theory and sociocultural factors involved in the analysis of childhood obesity, as well as culture of health in the Emilia Romagna area. These topics will be analysed using sociological concepts and a cultural approach. Deep knowledge of the main theories surrounding cultural sociology and health studies is required (expected duration: 1 month).

2. **Population identification:** The second phase will be devoted to identifying the target population and recruiting patients, families, health care workers and institution representatives (expected duration: 2 months).

3. **Empirical research:** The third phase will be dedicated to empirical research. Focus groups and interviews will be conducted to obtain feedback regarding the analysis of food culture and culture of health in Reggio Emilia’s urban and cultural context (expected duration: 6 months).

4. **Data analysis:** The fourth phase involves the analysis of qualitative data collected during the previous phases. The data will be subsequently socio culturally analysed to understand the genesis and the harsh persistence of the childhood obesity, and the conditions under which reproduction of lifestyle occurs (expected duration: 2 months).

5. **Dissemination:** In the final phase the outcomes will be disseminated through research report, scientific articles, and seminars (expected duration: 1 month).

f. Timing project: 12 months

g. Tasks

The tasks provided for the person entitled of the research fellowship will be as follow:

1) Ensure his/her enduring presence at Dipartimento di Scienze Politiche e Sociali – Alma Mater Studiorum – Università di Bologna

2) Full participation in carrying out scientific and organisational activities regarding the research.

3) To fulfil the tasks relating to the research assigned and determined by the tutor during regular meetings.
REFERENCES

Broccoli S, et. al. (2016), Motivational Interviewing to Treat Overweight Children: 24- Month Follow-Up of a Randomized Controlled Trial. Pediatrics;137(1).
Moruzzi M. (a cura di) (2005), Reti del nuovo welfare. La sfida dell’e-care, FrancoAngeli, Milano.