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Paper title

Women's perceptions of biotechnologies: the case of genetically modified foods

Abstract

The applications of biotechnologies have been the object of considerable hopes and debate in most European countries in the past decades. Experience has shown that the successful introduction of a new technology requires careful attention to the interactions between technology and society. This implies to analyze and follow the publics' perceptions of biotechnologies, as studies have found "publics" rather than a single "general public". Among others, women constitute a public to analyze in relationship with technology, for example in a feminist perspective (Wajzman, 1995).

Not all biotech applications are given the same level of attention and critical reception: human health applications have been received positively, but the agricultural applications as well as genetically modified foods have engendered general criticisms and anxieties (amongst others, Pardo, Midden, and Miller, 2002). This presentation focuses on GM foods, an application that raises the question of the individual freedom of choice toward scientific and technological developments, and that highlights the various roles which the public endorses within the framework of the relation science - society: they can be, at the same time, consumers and citizen (Einsiedel, 2000).

In order to study women within the framework of biotechnologies, the question of GM foods opens an innovative entry, which allows adopting a gender perspective. This presentation proposes to analyze the differences in the perceptions of GM foods between women and men by emphasizing the social sex roles over traditional explanations of differences of attitudes toward science and technology (*deficit model*, trust, values, etc). In order to achieve this goal, we will use the Swiss data of the Eurobarometer Biotechnology 2002.

Results show that women are not only more concerned about the quality and the value of food, but they also care more about the risks inherent to a possible introduction of GM foods. Women are more critical toward the benefits of GM foods. Finally, the hypothetical arguments that could play in favour of buying GM foods seems to be less appealing to women than men. These differences are not explained by a lack of knowledge about genetics (*deficit model*), but they may partially be explained by trust and values differences. However, the latter explanatory factors are related to the different socialization patterns. Thus the myth of the nurturing woman still remains deep-rooted in the spirits and in the posture of the privileged managers of the domestic universe, which makes women principally concerned by GM foods.

Einsiedel E. (2000), « Understanding "publics" in the public understanding of science », in Dierkes M., Grote C. (eds), *Between Understanding and Trust: the Public, Science and Technology*, Reading, Harwood Academic Publishers, pp. 205-215.

Pardo, R., Midden, C. and J. D. Miller (2002). « Attitudes toward biotechnology in the European Union », *Journal of Biotechnology*, 98, pp. 9-24.

Wajzman J. (1995), « Feminist theories of technology », in Jasanoff S., Markle G. E., Petersen J. C., Pinch T. (eds), *Handbook of science and technology studies*, Thousand Oaks, Sage, pp. 189-203.

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