Reviewer’s report

Title: Importance of Details in Food Descriptions in Estimating Population Nutrient Intake Distributions

Version: 1 Date: 02 Jan 2019

Reviewer: Thea Zimmerman

Reviewer’s report:

I appreciate the authors' responses to my comments, and most have been adequately addressed by the revision. However:

Thorough editing for language, grammar, voice, and tense is needed. There are numerous grammatical errors and sentences that are quite difficult to understand at first read, due to language issues.

Permutation means to change the order of something, reverse, rearrange. Is this truly the meaning intended in this sentence (lines 151-153): "Stratified by food group, the importance of a facet (denoted by %IncMSE), was calculated as the percentage increase in prediction error, when data for that facet were permuted in the dataset, while keeping data for the other facets unchanged.” My understanding is that the facets are removed, not rearranged.

I appreciate the addition of lines 274-276, discussing the fact that many foods remain linked to the same code in the Dutch National Food Composition Database. This is an important point that actually runs counter to the idea of reducing the detail questions. The authors mention the importance of retaining more details in the interview to allow national surveillance (lines 340 and on), but make no mention of times when researchers not conducting a national surveillance study may still want to collected details even though the Food Composition Database does not contain food codes that reflect that information, such as intervention studies modifying certain aspects of the diet. In the absence of nutrient composition data reflecting those modifications, only the questionnaire data will tell researchers whether the study participants have modified their diets. Although questionnaire simplification is a worthy goal, limitations should be acknowledged.

Lines 328-335: I questioned the true effect of deleting facets on the coding effort, as the number of foods reported has more of an effect on coding time than the details reported. The authors' response indicated that most foods were auto-coded. However, the manuscript reports that the average time needed to link a combination to the food composition table was 5-10 minutes, and that 442 hours would be saved by facet removal. This is describing a manual coding effort, and although the authors added an explanation that only new food-descriptor combinations would require linking, my concern still stands: the number of food items that need to be manually coded more correctly determines the coding time, not the number of details collected about the food. Perhaps the authors intended to provide an idea of how the unimportant facets could lead to new food-descriptor combinations, but that is not the argument they have made.
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