# Social representations of safety in food services

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## ARTICLE INFO

## ABSTRACT

This research aimed to evoke and analyze the perceptions of safe food through the perspective of customers at two different food service settings in São Paulo, Brazil. In-depth interviews (N = 66) were conducted using a guide with open questions focused on the individual's perceptions of safety, knowledge of food-borne diseases and self-involvement in the food chain. The Collective Subject Discourse (CSD) technique, based on the Theory of Social Representations, was set as the framework for the content analysis of the individual speeches with the aim of writing a collective discourse representing the "voice of the customer". Similarities and differences reflecting different socio-economic backgrounds came up: in general, the interviewees showed concerns about hygiene and good practices and recognized some food hazards, especially those of chemical and biological natures. In situation of social vulnerability, some customers showed greater concern with the guarantee of access to a substantial meal in face of economic constraint. Finally, most customers reported a passive role in the food chain and seemed to transfer to the restaurant staff the entire responsibility for the safety of the meals served therein.

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## 1. Introduction

Customers' attitudes in food services have been extensively published using different theoretical frameworks (Fischer, de Jong, de Jonge, Frewer, & Nauta, 2005; Hansen, Holm, Frewer, Robinson, & Sandoe, 2003; Uggioni & Salay, 2012; Wilcock, Pun, Khanona, & Aung, 2004), especially in the identification of food hygiene and handle practices among consumers (Brewer & Prestat, 2002). Investigating customers' involvement in the food safety chain is essential in the development of effective risk management and communication strategies regarding this topic, both in the domestic scene and in foodservice settings (Raspor & Jevsnik, 2008).

The market of food services demonstrates expressive growth in Brazil as a result of the economic improvements and, to date, Brazilians take about two out of the three main daily meals outside home (FIESP, 2010). In this scenario, food services must be prepared to attend the increased demand, as well as food authorities and restaurant managers should know how customers make choices based on their views on food safety issues. Literature on customers' behaviors in food settings is still scarce in Brazil.

Much of the research regarding food risk perception has been quantitative in nature, that is, it is generally based on attitude scales or other psychometric measurements with medium to large samples of individuals (Danelon & Salay, 2012; Uggioni & Salay, 2012). However, the use of qualitative methods has likely been hastened by the need to explore consumers' knowledge, beliefs, values, feelings and preferences behind behaviors and the symbolic construction of meanings by a social group (Favalli, Skov, Spence, & Byrne, 2013; Fischer et al., 2005; Hawkins, Mothersbaugh, & Best, 2007; Lawless & Heymann, 2010; Lefèvre & Lefèvre, 2012).

Qualitative techniques have demonstrated their power in revealing how lay people base their judgment on criteria such as science facts, values, culture, mass media communication, social context and personal experiences and behaviors (Brewer & Prestat, 2002; Bruhn, 2005; Ellis & Tucker, 2009; Favalli et al., 2013; Hansen et al., 2003). Nevertheless, qualitative data demands a method for content analysis in order to make sense of what people are really saying in their personal or group discourses and in this line the Social Representations Theory – SRT – should be very useful in social research, especially when the researcher is interested in the common sense of a group of people about a certain issue (Lefèvre & Lefèvre, 2012).

Originally defined by Serge Moscovici in the 1960s, social representations are stocks of values, beliefs and metaphors that provide the members of a social group a code for social exchange, so they can name and classify unambiguously the various aspects of their world and their personal and group history (Moscovici, 2003). Besides, social representations are "re-workings" of knowledge and information produced and disseminated by cultural diffusers (e.g., mass media), religious institutions, and authorities (health, academy, politics, etc.), and reproduced in the social circles (Lefèvre & Lefèvre, 2012; Moscovici, 2003).

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The present study was based on interviews with customers of restaurants to gain understanding on their views of self-integration in the food safety chain. Afterwards, the Collective Subjective Discourse technique, based on the SRT, was used to identify, organize and quantify the main ideas embedded in the customers' discourses, as a way of giving voice to these customers.

## 2. Methods

### 2.1. Interviews

A total of 66 respondents were recruited in two different institutional restaurants, an in-house restaurant (R1, $N_1 = 30$), which serves meals to the employees of a company in the communications sector, and a social restaurant (R2, $N_2 = 36$) directed to the low-income public supported by an official program on Food Security (São Paulo, 2010). They were chosen to represent the diversity of socioeconomic backgrounds in the city of São Paulo, Brazil's largest urban center with global lifestyle and consumption patterns.

Before starting, participants were informed about the objectives of the research and that the personal interviews would be audio-taped. Then, they signed a term consenting with the use of the records as stated in the research protocol approved by the Ethics Research Committee of Faculty of Public Health at the University of Sao Paulo (protocol number 1808).

Twenty to 30-minute in-depth interviews were conducted using a semi-structure questionnaire with three open questions focused on food safety in food services. A guide with open questions was used to facilitate and foster broad participation of the consumers. Three questions comprised the guide: 1) What does safe food mean to you?, 2) What do you know about food-borne diseases?, and 3) Assuming all the concern over food quality and safety from field from table (i.e. primary production, processing, transport, storage, distribution, preparation for consumption), how far are you involved in the food safety chain as a customer of the restaurant? For each question, probes, such as "tell me more about that" or "what else?", were used to explore individuals' speeches more deeply and to provide contextual information for understanding the ways in which the person describe food safety in cognitive and behavioral dimensions.

The records of the interviews were transcribed verbatim.

### 2.2. Collective Subject Discourse

Lefèvre and Lefèvre (2012) proposed an analytical technique for qualitative data named Collective Subject Discourse (CSD), based on the SRT, which assumes that, in a society, ideas, opinions, beliefs and values are shared by groups of individuals so that the individual speeches show similarity of contents and meanings. The CSD comprised the following steps:

1) Identification of the Key Expressions (KE): selection of excerpts from speeches that bracket the essence thereof, i.e., debugging all that was irrelevant or not essential.
2) Identification of central ideas (CIs): names or linguistic expressions that briefly and accurately describe the meaning of the key expressions.
3) Identification of Anchors (A): anchors are general statement that qualify a specific context, express a latent idea or manifest a theory, belief, value, feeling, etc.

KE were grouped according to the analytical similarity with a certain CI and for each CI a synthesized speech was written in the first person singular, making up the Collective Subject Discourse (CSD).

The Qualiquantisoft® software helped in all stages of the analysis, from the selection of KE to the final CSD composition (IPDSC, 2013).

## 3. Results and discussion

About 73% of the interviewees from R1 (the institutional restaurant), were professionals and stated to have a college degree, pertaining to the most affluent socioeconomic classes in Brazil (A and B). On the other hand, only 14% of the customers in R2 (the social restaurant) reported to have a higher educational degree and, indeed, most of them pertained to the lower income classes (B, C and D), according to the Brazilian Socioeconomic Classification Criterion (ABEP, 2013). It is noteworthy that most customers from R2 were in situation of economical constraint, that is, unemployed or earning a lower salary or retirement pension. Only 5% of the R2 customers were homeless.

Differences in socioeconomic background not only reflect the nature of both services, but they also help to understand the views on food safety, perceptions of food risks and reported behaviors. Table 1 summarizes the socioeconomic profile of the interviewees.

Tables 2, 3 and 4 present the central ideas (CIs), the strength of each CI (relative frequency of occurrence in the individual discourses) and the summaries of the discourses related to each CI.

According to the SRT, two conceptual figures in an individual's discourses can be identified. Firstly, objectification explains how the individuals structure the comprehension of the object: he/she selects and decontextualizes the object that will be represented by selecting relevant pieces of information. Once the cutouts are made, the pieces are reunited in a scheme that becomes the core of the figurative representation, like "thinking with images" (Lefèvre, 2006). Such images are expressed in terms of the CI identified in the speeches.

The second figure is anchoring, when meaning is ascribed to objects by means of integrating them into the individual's existing world (Moscovici, 2003). Usually, anchorings appear as a statement of a general truth or opinion, like an aphorism.

In short, social representations turn into familiar something that is initially unfamiliar through a process that involves comparison of what is presented with the individual's values and preexisting, internalized theories widely accepted by his/her social group (Lefèvre & Lefèvre, 2012; Moscovici, 2003). This is why social representations reflect common sense.

### 3.1. The concept of safe food

Regarding the question "what does safe food mean to you?" (Table 2), eleven central ideas were identified in the individual discourses of both groups. *Hygiene*, *safety*, *freshness* and *quality standards* were the most salient CI in the discourse of group R1, while *risky foods*, *chemical hazards*, *sensory quality* and *affordability* appeared to be stronger ideas among customers in group R2. It is noteworthy that the access to food that fulfills the individual's dietary need was an issue of concern only among the customers of lower income. This is certainly due to the sensation of social vulnerability that these people were experiencing, differently from middle class customers. Such rationale seems to be perfectly voiced in the following anchoring found among R2 interviewees:

*"It's the food we have every day. Here we can have a cheap meal, for just one real [about U$0.50]. That's all I can afford. It's bad to feel hungry".*

*Hygiene* emphasizes sanitary parameters mostly assessed through aesthetics and visual cues. Previous works found that customers rely on visual indications associated with overall cleanliness to judge the level of safety and quality of the meal served in restaurant settings (Barber, Goodman, & Goh, 2011; Henson et al., 2006; Worsfold, 2006), as for example, North American customers who ranked the following top three indicators of food safety in Asian and Mexican restaurants: kitchen cleanliness, restroom cleanliness and cooking temperatures (Lee, Niode, Simonne, & Bruhn, 2012).