



Culinary choices: A sociopsychological perspective based on the concept of Distance to the Object



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ABSTRACT

Culinary choices are a dynamic process that involves many considerations, including individual, contextual, cultural, and social factors. This study provides a better understanding of how culinary socialization along with food neophobia, culinary decisions and culinary habits, underlie culinary choices, measured by the concept of Distance to the Object (DO). This concept is useful in exploring the role of some psychosocial factors: knowledge (real and perceived), involvement (importance, personal identification, perceived ability), and level of practices (behaviors) associated with the social object under study, here, cooking. In this study, the DO concept measures the relationships of an individual with culinary choices. A sample of 420 participants was asked to answer an online questionnaire. The results showed that individuals close to cooking, (e.g., those who use more time-consuming cooking methods, eat more home-cooked meals) (a) had a specific background of culinary socialization (e.g., they started cooking at a younger age, read and used cookbooks), (b) were less food neophobic, (c) used different criteria for culinary choices (e.g., family tradition, originality, taste), and (d) had different culinary habits (e.g., shopping for meals). Their culinary choices took their values into account, regardless of the conditions required to achieve them (complicated dishes, time-consuming methods). The underlying logic in these choices came through in their everyday meals but also in the meals they cooked for guests. DO seems to be a good instrument for predicting food decisions in the area of culinary practices and cooking.

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1. Introduction

The understanding of consumers and their food decisions has become a topic of interest with a focus on people's motivations, preferences and habits (Ellison, 2014; O'Neill, Hess, & Campbell, 2014). It appears that a wide variety of psychological motives underlie everyday culinary choices. By culinary choices we mean (1) purchasing habits, (for example some people shop for meals, other buy takeaway food, etc.), (2) culinary habits (some of them use cooking methods such as steaming, boiling or cooking in stock, microwaving, etc.) and (3) choice of recipes or dishes (taking into account food prices or difficulties in preparation, etc.). A better knowledge of individual differences in these psychological motives would then be useful in contributing to consumer science and food development strategies.

Culinary choices are rooted in one's biological and cultural inheritance. Our biological inheritance has determined that humans are omnivorous, which in turn, is what makes us eat a wide variety of foods (Rozin, Fischler, Shields, & Masson, 2006). Being omnivorous gives humans a great deal of dietary freedom but also encourages them to seek variety and to try new types of food. The search for novelty (neophilia) may paradoxically be accompanied by anxiety about ingestion (neophobia; i.e. "reluctance to eat and/or avoidance of novel foods", Pliner & Hobden, 1992) and food neophobia and neophilia influence people's daily eating behavior (Martins & Pliner, 2005; Siegrist, Hartmann, & Keller, 2013). To resolve this paradox, humans are endowed with the ability to learn, through their cultural inheritance. Sociocultural heritage includes knowledge, habits and customs, and beliefs about food. This social learning, implicit or explicit, allows the individual "to organise the edible" (Corbeau & Poulain, 2002). This zone of overlap, between the biological (e.g., being omnivorous) and the cultural (e.g., cultural inheritance), constitutes "a food social space"

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(Poulain, 2002a), which corresponds to the zone of freedom left to the human eater because eating is always governed by the conventions or habits of a society. Thus in each group, culinary choices are influenced by food habits pertaining to choices. These habits are related to what foods to eat, how they are cooked, which ones are cooked together in a given dish, which of these dishes are combined in a given meal, how meals are shared, and table manners (Rozin, Fischler, & Shields-Argelès, 2012). Eating and adopting these habits therefore establishes identity boundaries between the human groups of one culture and another, but also within the same culture between the individuals who constitute it. Clearly, then, human culinary choices are both social and individual (Cruwys, Bevelander, & Hermans, 2015; Ferzacca, Naidoo, Wang, Reddy, & Van Dam, 2013). Culinary choices are social because they deal with the conventions of society and individual because each individual also has a history, a personal relationship with food. Culinary choices also involve the past influences of personal experiences that have a strong impact on how people make their choices. As a result of social influence, culinary choices always reflect culinary socialization, and take place within a context of environmental and cultural influences. This culinary socialization takes into account the age at which the individual started cooking, the region where they live, and what or who contributed to the participant's development of cooking habits and cooking practices such as cooking alone or with another person. As a result of environmental and individual influences, culinary choices also represent individual histories of food patterns and eating experiences, referred to as "personal systems" (Sobal & Bisogni, 2009). The combination of these influences related to appropriate eating patterns and personal systems results in food and culinary decisions made within and reflected by this complex set of variables. Thus, culinary choices may vary due to many factors including the personal and the social influences to which a person has been and is exposed.

The multifaceted nature of human food decisions affecting culinary choices needs to be analyzed using new methods and theoretical options that integrate this multiplicity of factors. In this context, the Distance to Object concept (DO) appears to be useful. This concept was developed (Abric, 2001; Dany & Abric, 2007; Dany, Apostolidis, & Harabi, 2014) to study the role of certain sociopsychosocial variables (knowledge, involvement, practices) by explaining, from a sociocultural perspective (Reckwitz, 2002), the relationships that individuals and groups may develop with a social object. DO was developed in the field of the Social Representations Theory (Moscovici, 1973; Rateau, Moliner, Guimelli, & Abric, 2011; Wagner & Hayes, 2005). Moscovici (1973) defined SR as a "system(s) of values, ideas and practices with a twofold function; firstly, to establish an order which will enable individuals to orient themselves in their material and social world and to master it; secondly, to enable communication among the members of a community by providing them with codes for social exchange and a code for naming and classifying unambiguously the various aspects of their world and their individual and group history" (p. xiii). This concept was developed in order to pursue further the trend of studying practice as performance in empirical research in the field of social representations (Schatzki, 1996). This notion refers to the carrying out of practices, the performance of doings and sayings, which "actualize and sustain practices in the sense of nexuses" (Warde, 2005).

This DO concept is based on the assumptions that every individual can be positioned with respect to his/her distance to a social object (in this study, the social object is cooking), and that each position is regulated by social and psychological factors. Each position highlights the relationship that the individuals (or groups) have with the social object and how this relationship influences

the attitudes, beliefs or expectations developed around this object. In this sense DO constitutes an option for delimiting how different symbolic positions of individuals and social groups are anchored in specific socio-cognitive dynamics, and could help us to elucidate the social positions that individuals occupy in the social space (cf. Doise, Clemence, & Lorenzi-Cioldi, 1993; Miguel, Valentim, & Carugati, 2012).

DO was conceptualized as a three-component variable: knowledge (real and perceived), involvement (importance, personal identification, perceived ability), and level of practices (behaviors), all related to the social object under study. In other words, the individuals who are "close" to an object (short distance to it) have a greater knowledge of this object, feel more involved with it, and develop more practices related to this object (i.e. cooking). Distance to the Object is a dynamic variable, in the sense that circumstances occurring over a life span can modify it. For example, each individual can modify or change his/her own level of DO by developing knowledge about food or cooking, by changing or developing his/her cooking methods, and by adapting his/her food habits to his/her social relations or new life conditions. The composite nature of the DO (knowledge, involvement, and level of practices) can be perceived as a testimony of the involvement in the practice (cooking), and can explain the nature and process of the culinary choices. Furthermore, DO is liable to constitute a relevant indicator for the perception of the different "facets" of the change introduced by the external conditions which the individual and the group have to face and in which they participate (Dany et al., 2014).

The purpose of the present study was to explore the use of DO for understanding culinary choices (purchasing and culinary habits), and the relation between DO and culinary socialization and food neophobia. We hypothesized that an individual's distance to cooking (DO), plays a role in his/her culinary choices. The first hypothesis was that we expected individuals who were closer to cooking (i.e. who have a higher score on the DO variable) to have undergone a particular culinary socialization (e.g., started cooking at a younger age, read and used cookbooks). The second one was that individuals who were close to cooking would be less neophobic about food. The third one was that individuals close to cooking would use abroad range criteria for culinary decisions (e.g., price, health). Our last hypothesis was that individuals closer to cooking would have specific cooking habits (e.g., baking, roasting, sautéing foods).

In other words, this project aimed to study the relationship between personal social criteria and individuals' Distance to the Object "cooking" in a large French population. This purpose was developed through the description of differences regarding culinary choices with the general purpose of developing new knowledge and new approaches to understanding consumer choices.

2. Material and methods

2.1. Participants

An online survey was conducted. Four hundred and twenty participants were recruited from online culinary blogs and forums or social media websites (sites offering outings to take part in a variety of activities, both sporting and cultural). We retained the proportions of the participants who replied of their own accord after posting the study proposal, (namely, 16.7% male and 83.3% female). From all the participants who replied to this survey, participants were selected so as to be equally distributed across the main regions of France (Poulain, 2002a). Their mean age was 41.8 years old ($SD = 11.38$, range 20–68 years old). Table 1 shows the participants' characteristics.

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