



Toward new forms of meal sharing? Collective habits and personal diets

Estelle Masson^{a, *}, Sandrine Bubendorff^b, Christèle Fraïssé^a

^a *Laboratoire de Psychologie: Cognition, Comportement, Communication – EA 1285, Université de Bretagne Occidentale, 20 rue Duquesne, CS 93837, F-29238 Brest 03, France*

^b *Dynamiques Européenne - UMR 7367, Université de Strasbourg, MISHA, 5, allée du Général Rouvillois, CS 50008, 67083 Strasbourg cedex, France*

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ABSTRACT

This article sheds light on the fact that the commensality remains a fundamental aspect of eating in French culture. However, at the same time, the expansion of the individualisation and medicalisation of the act of eating during the latest decades impacted the social representations of food.

We will first place dietary practices into a general context in which the relationship to food tends to be individualised and in which health-related issues remain an important aspect of the discourse about food on internet.

Secondly, we will examine how these practices are (in)compatible with the defining dimensions of the French food model, in particular those relating to commensality (the practice of eating together) and food sharing.

It seems that although a personalised diet restricts the objective possibilities of food sharing, it is still central in representations of food and, in some cases, leads to the emergence of associated practices to introduce new forms of social eating behaviours, such as those made possible by the spread of the Internet.

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1. Introduction

Eating is undoubtedly one of the most fundamental, socialised, imaginative and collectively invested biological functions. A “total social fact” as considered by Marcel Mauss (Mauss, 2002/1923), food is also an object of social representations (Fischler & Masson, 2007; Lahlou, 1998; Masson, 2001; Moscovici, 1976) that is sensitive to ongoing societal developments (Fischler, 1990; Poulain, 2017). Culturally determined (Douglas, 1966; Goody, 1982) and socially codified (Elias, 1978/1939; Bourdieu, 2008; Grimod de La Reynière, 1997/1808), current food practices are marked by the combination of specific collective and individual temporalities. Evolving social, historical (Flandrin & Montanari, 1999/1996), cultural (Montanari, 1999), medical (Apfeldorfer & Zermati, 2006; Vigarello, 1993) or legal contexts help impose specific interpretative frameworks on food practices and on their significance for eaters.

Research by historians and ethnologists (Flandrin & Cobbi, 1999;

Goody, 1982) has illustrated different eating practices across the world and throughout history both in terms of food repertoires (what is judged to be edible) and culinary techniques, and consumption patterns (table manners). However, cultural specificities aside, these works show the importance that all societies, irrespective of time or place, have attached to food sharing (Simmel, 1997/1910; Freud, 1950/1912; Mauss, 2002/1923; Montanari, 1994; Fischler, 2011). Food sharing is linked not only to the more general issue of sharing available food resources in a society, but also to social morphology issues (Halbwachs, 1992/1925; Guth, 1988; Grignon, 2001). Systems of rules and rituals surround the act of eating together, prescribe eating partners, define portions and regulate social interactions. As will be discussed later, shared eating has an aggregative potential that strengthens the social bonds and common identity of people sharing a meal (Simmel, 1997/1910; Freud, 1950/1912; Symons, 1994; Lahlou, 2002; Sobal & Nelson, 2003).

This paper will first place the rise of dietary practices into a general context in which the relationship to food tends to be individualised. It will then evoke the specificities of the French relationship to food, and analyse problems that arise for eaters

* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: estelle.masson@univ-brest.fr (E. Masson).

opting out of the general diet to adopt a personalised one in a country whose social representations of food revolve around the notion of food sharing. It will be seen that new means of communication offer an unprecedented opportunity to restore a form of food sharing (commensality) and prevent the subjective isolation that dieters experience. We will therefore see that, despite some ideological changes (Conrad, 1979; Crawford, 1980) impacting the relation to food in the occidental societies, food remains a strong factor of sociability nowadays in France.

2. The temporality of social representations of food: change and permanence

The social representations are “a form of knowledge sociologically elaborated and shared” (Jodelet, 1984) [our translation] that contributed to the construction of a reality common to a social whole, *here-and-now*. As with any social representation, social representations of food are not fixed in time; they evolve. The dynamic nature of social representations is an important element in the theory of social representations formulated by Serge Moscovici (Moscovici, 1976; Moscovici, 1988). The willingness to take hold of a world in the making and not a world that has already been made (Moscovici & Hewstone, 1984) led Moscovici to abandon Durkheim’s (Durkheim, 1974/1898) earlier concept of collective representations. As underlined by Denise Jodelet (Jodelet, 1988), a social representation is not formed by erasing the past, but is always embedded in a pre-existing logic. Furthermore, its duration is limited as the representation develops in unison with, and not independently from, the society in which it unfolds. “Therefore, the representation is concurrently a product of the future and a product in the making; it changes by nature, not by accident” (Rouquette, 1994) [our translation].

Focusing on the temporality of social representations, Pascal Moliner (Moliner, 2001) identified three important phases in the development of a given social representation: emergence, stability and transformation.

As an indicator of the phase in which a given social representation is situated at a given time, he proposed, among other suggestions, to note the intensity of its surrounding collective communications (p. 251). In his view, this intensity is strong during the representation’s emergence and transformation phases, but weak during its stability phase. As regards food, the intensity of collective communications seems to be important at this time. In the current media landscape, there are many specialised magazines and scientific or popular articles on the different aspects of food, as well as radio and television programmes, whether entertainment, news, documentaries or commercials. If this observation is extended to new means of communication – the Internet in particular – again, food-related communications seems to be a current subject. An Internet search for “eating” carried out on the Google search engine from a French anonymous URL produced around 139 000 000 hits in a fraction of a second, whereas in comparison, a search for another vital function, e.g. breathing, produced 14,8 times fewer results (9 390 000 hits).¹ The intensity of food-related communications is not a new subject (Lahlou, 1998; Masson, 2001), on the one hand, reflecting its importance in social space, and on the other, suggesting that any associated representations are in a transformation phase.

If this is the case, what dimensions and aspects of food are

affected by these transformations in France? What does food-related communication focus on today?

In October 2013, we asked fifty French individuals (25 females, 25 males) aged between 18 and 60 years old ($M = 36.9$, $SD = 13.4$) and with varied socio-economic profiles to answer the following question: “In your opinion, what food-related issues are most often addressed in the media?”. Their answers were analysed using thematic content analysis (Bardin, 2003). This analysis enabled nine specific themes to be identified that could then be grouped into five main categories. The first category refers to the links between *food* and *health* and the importance of *eating a balanced diet* to maintain good health. The second regards *obesity* and *anorexia*, which are considered to be public health problems. The third refers to diet (*to be on a diet* or *following a diet*), adhering to an exclusion diet (e.g. *gluten-free eating*) or avoiding specific products (*vegetarianism*). The fourth regards the introduction of new types of food into a diet, such as *eating insects*. The fifth concerns *nutrition for children*, that is, the diet of a specific population. The nine themes were used as “character chains” to conduct internet research using the Google search engine (Table 1). This method is used to quantify the relative importance of the different themes deemed prominent by the subjects in the communicational flow. The measurement was repeated on five different dates (Table 1).

The data collected show strong fluctuations according to theme and date ($\text{Chi}^2 = 2396483$, d.f. 32, $p < 0.001$). The increase in the average results of all themes between the periods 2013–2014 and 2016–2017 reflects an increase in the communicational flow about food. Nevertheless, such an increase does not have a proportional effect on the different themes, showing that they are sensitive to social context and current events. This is particularly clear for the theme of “eating insects” which had the absolute highest number of results in 2013. This was an emerging theme in the media at that time and insects were being touted on numerous television programmes as an excellent source of protein that could provide a lower-cost alternative to the nutritional values of animal meat in the human food chain. The novelty has since worn off and communication on this theme has significantly declined. It was not until the last two periods (October 2016; April 2017) that it started to increase again. This renewed interest is connected to the addition of insects on the menus of some of France’s leading chefs. At the same time, the dwindling importance of the “gluten-free eating” theme was observed, a decline reflected in the results of studies on eating habits. In 2013, fifteen per cent of French people said that they avoided foods containing gluten, whereas in 2017 the figure was only 5% (Michels, 2013; 2017).

Although the absolute number of results varies significantly according to date, some themes nevertheless remain more predominant than others throughout the period. Irrespective of date, three themes are still ranked in the top five entries that return the most results: two themes associated with public health issues, namely obesity and anorexia, and one related to dieting habits (“going on a diet” and “following a diet”).

The importance of communication relating to the issue of dieting is mirrored in actual practices. As such, and despite the warnings presented in the group expert report by ANSES (the French Agency for Food, Environmental and Occupational Health & Safety) on the risks linked to dietary weight-loss practices (2010), some people are still following both short- and long-term weight-loss diets. In some ways, as shown by frequent coverage, dieting seems to have become commonplace, as shown in literature (Germov & Williams, 1996; Poulain, 2009a). In France, more than one in two women have followed such a diet at least once in their life (Masson, 2012). At the same time, some people are also following diets for medical reasons and there is a certain fad for special diets, which draw their legitimacy from a variety of different

¹ These figures were obtained from a search performed on 13 April 2017. Results obtained for the different character chains used fluctuated slightly from one date to the next, but the hierarchy of occurrences remains constant for this specific research.

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