



## Research report

## Eating practices and *habitus* in mothers. A Brazilian population-based survey <sup>☆</sup>



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## ABSTRACT

A population-based cross-sectional study was conducted with mothers living in the city of Santos, Brazil, in order to investigate their eating practices, and the interface between those practices and the concept of *habitus*. From a cluster analysis of the scores for dietary pattern and for food preparation and consumption, the mothers were categorised into five clusters of eating practices: practical mothers (19.8%), symbiotic mothers (3.2%), health-conscious hedonists (17.3%), traditionalists (34.6%), and family cooks (25.1%). To access the *habitus* of the eating-practice clusters, the following variables were compared: location of residence, profession, socioeconomic status, weight-loss practices, risk behaviours for eating disorders, disordered eating attitudes, body dissatisfaction, and cultural and technological consumption. For all the groups, the observed eating practices were permeated by responsibility for the family's diet, but with different manifestations. For symbiotic mothers, practical mothers, and family cooks, the primary function of their relation with food was to nourish their families, with little expression of their own tastes and preferences. The traditionalists and the health-conscious hedonists, on the other hand, manifested their role as mothers by providing food considered 'nutritionally proper' to their family members. Furthermore, aspects of contemporary lifestyles, such as little time for food, individualisation of meals, and consumption of processed foods, were found to coexist with the valorisation and maintenance of the traditional meals within some groups. The variety of eating practices could not be understood as a linear association between economic and cultural *capitals*; however, eating practices seemed to interact with those capitals, composing a *habitus*.

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## Introduction

Food consumption and the rituals and values around it have changed as contemporary societies have developed and become more globalised and individualised (Solér & Plazas, 2012). In Brazil, eating modifications have been related to important social changes, such as an increase of the middle class, improvements in women's education, urbanisation, and an increase in the number of women

entering the labour market (Victora et al., 2011). One of the most important changes in Brazilians' food consumption has been the reduction in consumption of traditional items, such as rice and beans, and the increase in consumption of ultra-processed food items (Levy et al., 2010). Research into food and culture is often interested in the relationship between traditional food and convenience food in Western eating practices. Moreover, research in this area investigates how practices around food have changed in response to the sociocultural movements that shape society and its practices (Solér & Plazas, 2012).

The concept of eating practices is an important tool in the investigation of eating modifications and its associated factors (Hunt, Fazio, McKenzie, & Moloney, 2011). Poulain and Proença (2003) define eating practices as a set of objective and subjective data that enables description and understanding of the food phenomena. This

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includes observed practices, practices reconstructed from the memory of the research participant, declared practices, social norms, opinions, values, attitudes, and symbolic representations. The description and analysis of eating practices can provide a detailed observation of a population, but a full understanding of eating practices requires a further step, which can be achieved within a theoretical framework.

The writings of Pierre Bourdieu (2010) provide a primary theoretical framework for further investigation into eating practices and the relationship between eating practices and social structures. The author advocates that differences in taste and practices, including those related to food, are determined by a set of embodied social structures (such as class, gender and ethnicity), which composes the *habitus*, his most central concept. The *habitus* is a set of internal dispositions that reflects social structures and history in individuals, and shapes how the individual perceives the world and acts in it. For Bourdieu, people are inserted in social spaces coupled to a symbolic system, and they compete for specific types of interchangeable *capitals*, a force inscribed in objective or subjective structures that underlies the immanent regularities of the social world. *Capitals* are classified as economic, cultural, social, and symbolic (Bourdieu, 2010). Bourdieu (2010) argues that eating practices act in accordance with the *habitus* of a group, and he discusses his findings regarding food consumption and opinions related to eating habits reported by different professional groups in France. That analysis led to the identification of two taste categories: the taste of luxury and the taste of necessity. The taste of luxury was established among the dominant classes, whose privileged access to certain types of food and to the *cultural capital* necessary to appreciate those foods were characteristics of social distinction. By contrast, the taste of necessity was characteristic of the working class, for whom heavier and fulfilling foods would best supply their basic body needs. These two attitudes towards food have also been referred to as ‘food as form’ and ‘food as function’,<sup>1</sup> respectively (Øygard, 2000).

Several quantitative studies have used Bourdieu’s theoretical framework to investigate eating. Some of these have compared different aspects of eating practices between different social classes with the goal of understanding the influence of *economic* and *cultural capitals* on food tastes (Kraaykamp, 2002; Øygard, 2000; Tomlinson, 1994). As in Bourdieu (2010), individuals from lower socioeconomic levels showed preferences for energy-dense foods. However, a higher *cultural capital* was associated with both sophisticated foods and a taste for healthy or exotic foods. Other studies have compared different dimensions (e.g. social class, education, and gender) among people with distinct eating practices in order to access their *habitus* (Cockerham, 2000; Tivadar & Luthar, 2005). Tivadar and Luthar (2005) investigated aspects of the eating practices of Slovenian men and women and their association with the participants’ worldview and cultural consumption. The results suggested that the preferences and beliefs held by individuals about food could be located on a traditionalism/post-traditionalism spectrum. Food practices seemed to be in homology with the general ethics of the respondents, and gender was an important factor influencing food involvement and disciplinary practices in maintaining a healthy diet. Women devoted more time to food than men did, and a greater number followed a dietary regime (Tivadar & Luthar, 2005). Many others studies have highlighted the importance of gender on the construction of eating practices (Gatley, Caraher, & Lang, 2014; Lupton, 2000; Yang, Buys, Judd, Gower, & Locher, 2013).

Gender has an important role in the division of ‘food work’ within the domestic sphere. Women have the central responsibility for the family’s eating practices; this typically involves purchasing, cooking, and serving the food (Gatley et al., 2014). Such responsibilities are seen as a sign of love, and reinforce the social construction of motherhood (Bourdieu, 2010). Furthermore, women are strongly influenced by cultural beauty standards (Fitzsimmons-Craft, Harney, Brownstone, Higgins, & Bardone-Cone, 2012). According to Bourdieu (2002), social structures within the feminine *habitus* compose a uniquely feminine experience of the body in which it is constantly framed as an object. Thus, women are a relevant group in the study of eating practices. However, there are no published reports of quantitative studies based on Bourdieu’s theories that have explored aspects of women’s eating practices (e.g. food consumption, family commensality, and food preparation) in relation to specifically relevant themes for this population, such as body dissatisfaction, dieting practices, and risk behaviours for eating disorders. Such research is necessary in order to achieve a deeper understanding of the feminine *habitus*.

In Brazil, qualitative studies have used Bourdieu’s framework to understand eating practices (Bezerra, 2009; Carvalho & Luz, 2011; Murrieta, 2001; Oliveira, Veras, & Prado, 2010; Saglio-Yatzimirsky, 2006). However, the lack of representative-population studies and the low diversity of the groups studied do not provide an adequate assessment of Bourdieu’s theories in the Brazilian context of recent economic growth, vast social inequality, and nutritional transition.

The study of mother’s eating practices may contribute to greater understanding of the inherent logic that motivates eating in a feminine population. In addition, it may inform about the contemporary food phenomena and eating practices within the family context in Brazil. Thus, Bourdieu’s (2010) concept of *habitus* will be used in the current study as an instrument to allow deeper investigation of the eating practices of mothers in Brazil and the relation of those eating practices to other aspects of those mothers’ lives. In addition, we will incorporate particular socioeconomic and cultural aspects into the understanding of these eating practices. Our hypotheses are: (1) mothers’ eating practices will be strongly directed toward the family, but in distinct ways as influenced by variables such as socioeconomic level, occupation, and body image; and (2) there will be a strong influence of contemporary lifestyle on their eating practices (e.g. the desire for practical processed foods) concomitantly with a low maintenance of traditional eating practices. Hence, the objectives of this study were to: (a) classify mothers residing in the city of Santos, Brazil into groups based on similar eating practices; and (b) make between-group comparisons of several variables concerning other aspects of mothers’ lives in order to understand the sample’s *habitus*.

## Materials and methods

### Participants and study design

The present study is part of two population surveys: the ‘Nutritional Environment Assessment in the City of Santos’ and the ‘Influence of Eating Practices and Nutritional Environment on Weight Gain in Mothers Residing in the City of Santos’.

The city of Santos is located in the southeast region of Brazil. The population is 419,614, with 54.25% being women. The widest age bracket includes individuals aged 25–29 years. The economy is important to the wider region because Santos is the principal city in its region and the largest port city in Latin America. However, the city is characterised by significant social inequality: it has the 9th highest per capita income in the country, but 10% of its residents live in poverty (IBGE, 2012).

<sup>1</sup> While the term ‘food as function’ embraces the material purpose of food in supplying nutrients and energy to the body, ‘food as form’ refers to attitudes towards food that are more concerned with the social value of the foods chosen for consumption (Øygard, 2000).

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