Social representations of dietary practices and their determinants in a Moroccan community

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Abstract. Food is a multidimensional science that has appeal among other social representations of food practices. This study aimed to characterize and identify the determinants of eating practices according to the social representations of a population in the Rabat-Salé-Kenitra (RSK) region of Morocco. Data concerning socio-demographic characteristics were collected using a questionnaire. The social representations of dietary practices were obtained by characterizing three dietary practices. The main results showed that the high proportion of the study population is over 34 years old, is female, is married, and resides in the urban area. The most characteristic of good dietary practices chosen by the majority of the population was palatability, the factor chosen as the least characteristic of good dietary practices was traditional preparations. Among the studied factors, age, gender, higher level of education, professional occupation, "married" marital status, and involvement in purchasing and food preparation within the household are the determinants of certain representations.

1 Introduction

The social and human sciences approach applied to food tries to understand the representations of individuals to bring tools to explain the behaviours "deviance" factors compared to privileged rationality. The approach recognizes the importance of the meaning given by individuals to their actions. It represents them not for an opposition between experts objective and profanes subjective representations but a food associated values co-construction [1]. Food practices that include the food supply, processing, preparation and consumption systems depend on social, spatial and cultural diversity [2]. Many food behaviour models have shown an association between food practices and representations [3]. Indeed, a representation is cognitive, activated by practice and influenced by the information circulating within the society. Therefore, a representation is social and thus dependent on cultures, ideologies and practices [4]. Considering this dual cognitive and social determination leads to a preference for a structural theory of social representations [5]. This theory proposes an organization of the themes associated with the represented object [6] Indeed, the human spirit carries out a characterization of acts, producing thus rules and norms based on prescriptions and proscriptions framed by the culture of belonging [7]. Since characterization is an extensive approach, it makes it possible to qualify the practice as good or bad while highlighting the social representation elements hierarchy [8]. In terms of food practices, the representations of "good practices" are rather linked to the natural, traditional and transgenerational influences [9]. On the other hand, those that are part of the «bad» are linked to industrialization, modernity and transgression. Thus, the study of social representations would make it possible to identify the elements defining representation and show the existence of a central nucleus resistant to change [10].

This work aimed to study the social representations of good food practices and their determinants in an adult population. It has a theoretical scope, insofar as it makes it possible to draw up an inventory of the representations of good dietary practices in the study population. It also has a methodological scope, as it allows describing the social representations that come under sociology using a questionnaire. Finally, it has an empirical scope, as it opens up perspectives of qualitative sociological research on social representations of diet in Morocco.

2 Methods

This study was carried out in 2018 in seven cities of Rabat - Salé - Kénitra (RSK) region of Morocco on adult subjects belonging to 507 households. The cities studied are Kenitra, Khemisset, Rabat, Salé, Skhirate Temara, Sidi Kassem and Sidi Slimane. The total surveyed sample size was 1014, with two participants per household, one having a primary role and the latter a secondary role in food purchases and preparations within the household [11.12].

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2.1 Data collection

Data on the following socio-demographic characteristics: age, gender, area of residence, level of education, occupation, marital status and the participant's role in food purchases and preparation within the household were collected using a questionnaire. The social representations of dietary practices were studied by a questionnaire on the characterization of nine selected food practices based on the literature [9, 13-16] and validated by a committee of experts in nutrition and food sciences.

From the nine proposed practices, the participants were invited to successively choose, the three that they felt best characterized good dietary practices; then from the remaining six practices, the three that, according to them, are the least good dietary practices. As a result, three of the nine proposed practices are not selected. Codes were assigned to each characterization, including Code 1 for the least characteristic practices, Code 2 for the not selected practices and Code 3 for the most characteristic practices [10]. This manuscript presents data on the social representations of three food practices, particularly traditional preparations, having meals at home, and delicious preparations or palatability.

2.2 Statistical analysis

Analysis of the social representations of good dietary practices was carried out using the characterization approach [10]. Thus, items with a distribution close to a J curve belong to the central nucleus of representation those with a distribution close to a U curve, are a source of division of the population into two sub-groups with contrasting views; and those having a distribution close to a bell curve (Gaussian type) indicate that the items have only a distant relationship with the object of the representation. This analysis was performed using Microsoft Office Excel 2007 software.

The association between socio-demographic characteristics and social representations of good dietary practices were carried out using Khi 2 test. SPSS software for Windows (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences, version 21) was used for statistical analyses. The threshold for statistical significance was set at the probability value of $p < 0.05$.

2.3 Ethical aspect

The study was authorized by the local and health authorities of the study region. The fundamental ethical principles governing the conduct of the research were respected, including informing participants about the study objectives, volunteering, confidentiality and the right to interrupt their participation in the study at any time. Free and informed prior consent was obtained from the study participants.

3 Results

3.1 Study population characteristics

The majority of the study population was over 34 years old, female, married, did not have a higher level of education, and resides in the urban area. Half of the participants (50%) had a primary role, and the other half a secondary role in food purchases and preparation within the household.

3.2 Characterization of good dietary practices

Table 1 shows that palatability is the most frequently cited characteristic of good dietary practices. Figure 1 shows that the distribution of the palatability characterization is close to a curve in the "J" shape. This table also shows that traditional preparations are chosen by the majority of the study population as the least characteristic of good dietary practices. Figure 2 shows that the distribution of the characterization of traditional preparations, is close to the curve in the "U" shape. This table also shows that eating at home is not selected by the majority of the study population as good dietary practice. Figure 3 shows that the distribution of the characterization of eating meals at home is close to Gaussian bell curves.

Table1: Characterization of good dietary practices (n=1014)

Items	Response codes		
	LC	**NS**	**MC**
Traditional preparations	+++*	+	++
Eating at home	+	+++*	++
Palatability	++	+	+++*

*= The most common characterization for each item ; LC= The least characteristic items; NS = Not selected ;
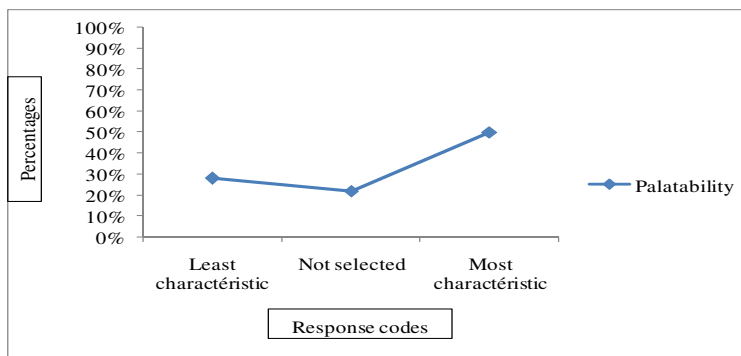MC= The most characteristic items.

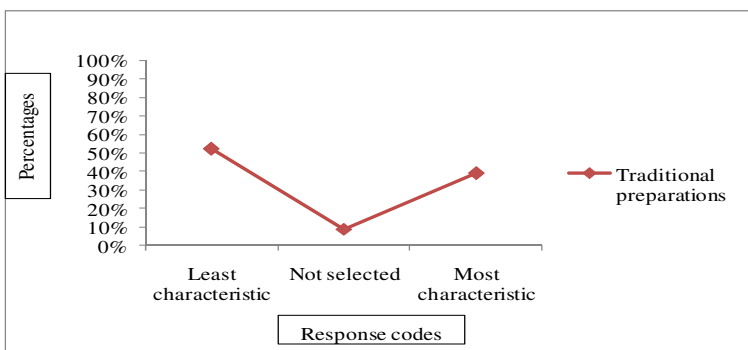**Figure 1 :** Central element (n=1014)

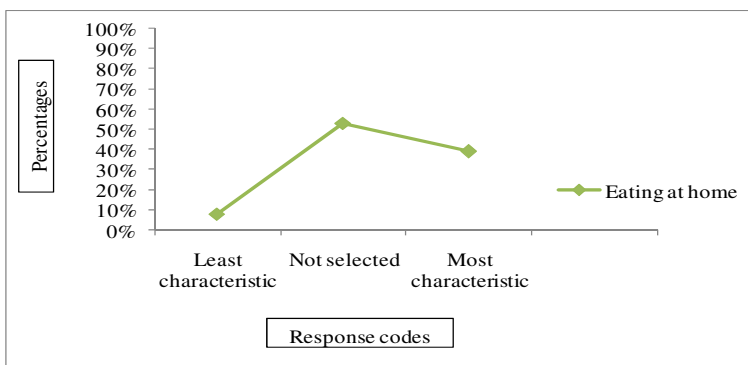**Figure 2:** Contrasting element (n=1014)

Figure 3: Unrelated items (n=1014)

3.3 Associations between socio-demographic characteristics and social representations of good dietary practices

Table 2 shows a significant association of traditional preparations with marital status "married" (p=0.01) and the role in household food purchases and preparation (p=0.007). On the opposite, the characterization of eating at home has a significant association with gender (p<0.001), higher education (p=0.003), occupation (p<0.001), marital status "Married" (p<0.001), and the main role in food purchases and preparations within the household (p<0.001). Also, the characterization of palatability has a significant association with gender (p<0.001), marital status "Married" (p<0.001), and the role in food purchases and preparation within the household (p<0.001).

Tableau 2: Associations between socio-demographic characteristics and social representations of good dietary practices (n=1014)

Characteristics	Traditional preparations (P*)	Eating meals at home (P*)	Palatability (P*)
Age	0.2 NS	0.7 NS	0.5 NS
Gender Age	0.1 NS	<0.001**	<0.001**
Area of résidence	0.6 NS	0.3 NS	0.5 NS
higher education level	0.4 NS	0.003**	0.1 NS
Professional occupation	0.4NS	<0.001**	0.1 NS
Marital status Married	0.01**	<0.001**	<0.001 **
Role in household food purchases and food preparation	0.007**	<0.001**	<0.001 **

*= Khi2 test (Signifiance level : p<0.05); **= Significant associations ; NS= Not Significant associations

4 Discussion

Initially, this research dealt with the social representations of nine dietary practices. Nevertheless, in this paper, we have reported only the results available so far, particularly those relating to the characterization of traditional food, eating meals at home and palatability, to deal with all the results and publish.

In this research, social representations in the field of sociology were studied using a questionnaire. Indeed, the interview is not the only tool used in sociology, it is possible to carry out qualitative surveys with questionnaires seeking not only the opinion of the respondents but also the organization of their representations while addressing their cognitive and social dimensions [10]. The present study revealed the characterizations of dietary practices represented by different forms of distribution curves. Thus, the distribution of the palatability characterization is close to a curve in "J", indicating that palatability belongs to the central nucleus of the representation [10]. On the other hand, the study results show that the distribution of characterization of traditional preparations is close to a curve in "U", which leads to conclude that this practice is the source of division of the population into two sub-groups with contrasting visions [10]. The study data also revealed that the distribution of characterization of eating meals at home is close to the Gaussian bell curve, indicating that this practice is the peripheral element of representation, i.e., according to the population studied, it does not primarily define a good dietary practice [10]. The study also found that social representations of dietary practices are likely to vary significantly by age, gender, educational attainment, occupation and marital status. In the same way, a tendency of the consumer to free themselves from sociological or physical frontiers according to their socio-demographic characteristics has already been reported [17].

Nevertheless, beyond the effect of socio-demographic variables, it is the expectations formed based on the information provided that have main effects on emotional reactions [6]. The present study also revealed that social representations of good dietary practices are likely to vary significantly depending on the degree of involvement of the individual in food purchases and preparations within the household. This can be explained by the fact that, the degree of involvement of a subject in the different tasks related to food, significantly impacts its representations. Furthermore, dietary behaviours related to representations [17] evolve throughout life according to the biological and psychological components, the economic and social environment, and the norms that govern life in society [18]. Moreover, food models are based on the incorporation of new rules and new representations [19].

Limitations of the study

The literature has not dealt much with representations of the practices related to diet that are the subject of this work, which has somewhat limited the elaboration of the theoretical basis and the discussion of the obtained data.

Conclusion and recommendations

This work involved the study of social representations of good dietary practices by questionnaire in an adult population. In our opinion, the dietary practices examined in this study have not been investigated by previous studies. The results obtained open up prospects for qualitative sociological research on the social representations about other dietary practices in Morocco.

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