

*Full Length Research Paper*

## **Food for elderly people: Considerations of ethnographic contributions**

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**This study aims to investigate how elderly consumers narrate their experience of food consumption. Through a qualitative methodology of "ethnographic inspiration", the study sought to understand how a group of elderly people construct meanings of consumption within their particular worldview. The content analysis of the interviews provided a set of findings relevant to a better understanding of the role played by food in many everyday situations experienced by elderly consumers who contribute to the construction of meaning in the experience of food consumption. The transformations that occur in our society are reflected in all aspects of an individual's life, including his relationship with the universe of consumption. Thus, based on insights drawn from the empirical data analysis, several categories emerged from the study and served to explain the phenomenon: nostalgia, connection with friends, family, entertainment, solitude, religion, habitus and regional identity. Food is part of the life of consumers surveyed in the most anticipated and common everyday situations with a form of entertainment, information source, health, family and friendship, routine and sadness. Given the importance of food as an expression of personal identity, food takes on a symbolic value in the life of the elderly. It is hoped that the results of this research may contribute to both importance and fill the gaps existing in the knowledge of the literature regarding food consumption, and experiences with regard to the characteristics of old age.**

**Key words:** Consumer behavior, third age, food, culture, consumption habits.

### **INTRODUCTION**

In Brazil, researchers have ignored a set of investigative themes that give a clearer understanding of consumption actions, their subjects and contexts, as well as field and ethnographic researches related to practices, patterns, and rituals on consumption and purchase linked to different social groups, ages, genders, religions, and the study of objects and what they can inform us about, on the Brazilian society (Addis and Holbrook, 2001).

Addis and Holbrook (2001) yet highlights that some social groups are not considered as members of a modern and consumption society, once there is emphasis in the dimension of an excluded and unappreciated

minority according to some studies. This is clearly remarkable in studies that encompass segments of aged consumers, sometimes inquired with a focus on negative questions, such as illnesses and products related to health. One fact that can not be ignored here is a perception that the standard of living of aged consumers can not be understood only through a utilitarian perspective and as a function of their level of incomes, but also through patterns and habits, besides requirements that have to follow a set of needs.

It is exactly in this context that we can descry opportunities for the accomplishment of investigations that seem to prioritize the articulation of themes that compose the "backbone" of this paper: consumption, aged consumers, and food.

In order to understand subjects regarding consumption

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that are specific for a market called “aged market”, “senior citizens” or “mature people”, we have examined the presence of knowledge gap related aspects to symbolical aspects of consumption experiences and insignificant academic effort. However, this study was interested on the accomplishment of an empirical research in which an investigation was carried out on how food consumption of aged consumers (60 years old or more) are influenced by the cultural and symbolical system.

### **The role of culture in food**

Da Matta (1986) wrote: “each nutritive substance can be understood as nourishment, but nourishment is not food.” From this proposition, it can be perceived that the cultural aspect of food is the difference between food and nourishment.

In this context, the discussion of the cultural meaning that encompasses the differentiation between the words, “nourishment” and “food”, proposed by DaMatta (1986) is something significant. For this author, food is used to establish identity, once it represents modes, styles, and ways of feeding. However, obtaining food is the major part of symbols and cultural elements. Da Matta (1986) explains the relation between culture and feeding: “Throughout the globe, man has to eat but each society defines what food means according to its own understanding”.

According to Levi-Strauss (1975), food can be understood as a language. The gastronomy of a society indicates its values. In human societies, hunger and thirst are elaborated and satisfied from cultural, social, and historical aspects. Thus, as Garine explains, what, with whom, when, how and where we eat – as well as alimentary options and forbidding that occasionally differentiate human groups – are defined by culture: “Man eats according to the society in which he is inserted” (Gariné, 1987). In human food, the structure of society is materialized; social and social-environmental interaction is updated, sociocultural representations (beliefs, rules, values) confer significance to the social action of those that have a same culture in common. The conceptual abstraction of culture is fully-realized into the dish (Millán, 2002).

Barthes (1975) wrote that “each situation presents its own alimentary origin”. In this same way, Field (1999) mentioned that baby feeding, Sunday food, party food, etc. are examples of classifications for food.

Another aspect of the cultural role for food mentioned by Field (1999) is the development of taste. In many cultural systems, the sense of taste and smell identifies and classifies types of food in which something is eatable, in opposition to what is not. This way, taste is a cultural construct. Culture interferes by means of codes, defining what is “eatable” and what is not, thus creating feed taboos. Likewise, visual and tactile properties are further sensorial characteristics that determine whether a

nutriment is appropriate or not in a society, configuring aspects of feed symbolism.

Barthes (1975) also draws attention to the fact that texture plays an important role in the selection of food. As for the Brazilian society, there is a preference for cooked food in opposition to raw food (Braga, 2004).

For a more general understanding of the context, they tried to demonstrate that a symbolical meaning changes according to the cultural context, as well as the individual trend to obey rules imposed by some culture.

### **Feeding culture: Contributions of feeding anthropology**

In the past years, feeding has been analyzed under several independent - and at the same time complementary - approaches: the economical approach, the nutritional approach, the social approach, and the cultural approach, with interest for preferences, habits, gastronomic traditions, representations, identities practices, rites and taboos (which means the symbolic aspect of feeding) (Field, 1999). Such approaches reinforce the proposition that eating is not just a mere biological activity or motivated by economical factors, but a set of sociocultural phenomena that orientate behaviors and decisions of consumers.

In anthropology, culture can be understood as a symbolical system, which means a set of control mechanisms, plans, prescriptions, rules, and instructions that rule human behavior (Geertz, 1973). These symbols and meanings are shared between the members of a cultural system presenting public aspects and, thus, not individual or private ones. Sahlins (1976) mentions that culture defines life not by means of material pressures imposed by the everyday life, but by means of a symbolical system. Douglas (1976) completes this conception: he said that rules that form a symbolical system are arbitrary in their formulation and have a clear intention to discipline human behavior. With such propositions we can perceive that our feeding habits are a part of a cultural system full of symbols, meanings, and classifications, in such a way that no food is exempted of cultural associations that a society can assign to it.

Feeding is able to engender questionings that lead to consideration of essential questions of anthropology such as the relation of culture and nature – that is, the symbolical and biological. Eating is a vital action; life is not possible without it. But when a man eats, he assigns meanings to it, and this goes beyond the use of some food by the human organism (Braga, 2004).

Feeding is not a solitary action, but a social activity that encompasses other people and creates modes of sociability. The study also needs to highlight the aesthetical aspect of feeding, for instance, the exhibition of a food on a table. Thus, feeding can just be understood as a complex social process that articulates several different sectors of life, including the sacred

dimension (Braga, 2004).

When he was thinking of feeding, Fischler (2001) drew his attention to the intimate relation that the feeding action presents: "Food has to overpass the oral barrier to be introduced into us and become the inner substance" (Fischler, 2001: 7). For this author, a man always nourishes himself by means of imaginary meanings, sharing collective representations to transform feeding in a very complex action, represented by a symbolical value.

In this search for the meaning of feeding in the history of mankind with a consequent creation of a "human and humanized" gastronomy, Perlés (1979: 4) proposes a differentiation between the feeding action and the culinary action. The last action is specific for human species. However, "linkages of feeding actions, acquisition, transformation, and feeding consumption are effectively a process shared with all animals and also specifically with humans." According to Lévi-Strauss (1975), a cuisine is a way by which nature is transformed in culture. A man eats according to the society in which he belongs to and more precisely to his group, thus establishing differences and marking frontiers.

Feeding encompasses emotion, works with memory and feelings. Expressions such as "my mother's cookery" or "home feeding" illustrate this case very well, evoking childhood, comfort, safety, and absence of sophistication or exoticism. Both expressions are "familiar", or "near". The mother's touch is a signature that means what is being prepared and how it is being prepared, marking food with personal remembrances (Braga, 2004).

Feeding action is full of symbolisms and specific meanings. For example, "during mankind history, people as saints and mystics choose to starve due to religious reasons" (Giddens, 2006). Jesus symbolized eternal life through wine and bread sharing.

A physical and emotional feeding is so related to each of us. Difficulties with feeding "are a form used to express feelings that cannot be said, and emotions that cannot be recognized" (Menéndez, 2007). Then we can say that food is a basic human need, but also a privileged conductor for a nutritive and affective feeding since our birth. Food assures us comfort and safe remembrances.

Feeding can also accentuate some emotions linked to memory. Some food can make us remember someone or some place by means of pleasure and the affective dimension linked to it. Then it appears as a triggering element that allows the activation not only of a memory of something distant, but also the remembrance – easing or emphasizing the sorrows of longing.

Poulain (2006) argues that feeding is the first social apprenticeship of human beings from childhood: it is into the nucleus of the "primary socialization" process. In this way, he proposed that humans develop cultural tools in collective ways to get food, maybe in their own language. Thus, moral criteria, organization of everyday life, kindred systems, and religious taboos, among aspects of life

in a society, can be closely linked to feeding habits.

## METHODOLOGY

The study employed a qualitative strategy. Gummesson (2003), when defending the use of qualitative methods for marketing studies, highlighted the following advantages: a broader understanding of phenomena, simultaneity between production and data analysis, frequent comparisons of data already produced and the current literature, possibility to use intuition and experience aspects with systematization and severity, alternative interpretations that can produce new understandings on same situation of research, and the possibility to produce a rich detailing of some phenomenon.

### Ethnography

This study has been accomplished from an ethnographic method. Geertz (1973) presents the ethnographic method as a dense description in which the researcher makes a deep description of cultures as nets of significance that need to be studied. Participative observation and the accomplishment of deep interviews were conducted aiming to reach a deep understanding of the object of study presented here, thus, revealing all its subjectivity and singularity inside a range of social phenomena (Elliott and Jankel-Elliott, 2003).

Interviews allowed a free discursive flow of our interviewees, with replies at their own will. In deep interviews, interviewees have been stimulated to give their own definitions of reality and their particular motivations, and this led us to some meanings of study that are themes from their own viewpoint.

### Data collection

In this study, we employed the age bracket proposed by the Brazilian Legislation, which defines who can be understood as an aged person: "The Aged People Statute is established to rule the rights assured to people whose age is equal or above 60 years (Law n. 10,741 from October 1st 2003)".

Field work for this study was carried out from May to December 2010. During the first period of "ethnographic immersion", the participative observation and individual interviews were the dominant methodological procedures.

To accomplish the research according to suitable technical parameters, the study employed a technique of data collection by means of deep interviews. The choice of a collection technique by means of personal interviews was supported by the study of McDaniel and Gates (2003) when they proposed: "personal interviews are less stressful for elder interviewees, so they can present higher levels of replies".

Visits were scheduled and we followed a routine: informal conversations introduced several subjects related to the general theme of consumption in a free manner, including purchases, household budgets, the role of relatives in decisions, and pictures. Besides that, it was observed that the placement of objects into their houses many times could take pictures and make an inspection in closets and refrigerators.

Before the beginning of each interview, the researcher explained to the interviewee the purpose and importance of the survey, the meaning of his/ her collaboration, as well as the complete confidentiality of his/ her data. The average time for interviews was around four hours.

The participative observation included lunch, dinner, collation,

visits to supermarkets, residences of interviewees, balls, championships and each activity in which senior citizens could be involved. The purpose was to prioritize the abstraction of individuals in their own replies in order to extract some symbolic aspects of feeding. Observations were accomplished according to the suggestions of Malinowski (2003).

### Procedures of data analysis

Considering the fact that the eighteen respondents selected to be studied could express themselves freely during their interviews, the deep interviews that were accomplished were able to produce a very rich set of data. After transcription of the data, they were submitted for analysis of the contents. Gummesson (2003) explained that for the discourse analysis of people, the analysis of contents is the best method to be used, because it represents a severe application of reliability and validity criteria.

For the transcription of collected materials, a significant time was set aside because it was necessary to carefully listen to the records several times in order to remember the interviewees' discourse, and to check if some of the vocal intonations used by many of the elderly people needed a higher level of attention during the listening and transcription.

In this stage, a detailed examination of each discourse was accomplished. It was a moment for decoding and categorization of interview contents. According to Goulding (1999), it is valid to highlight that this demanding and labored analytical process joins the rigor and the quality that a qualitative analysis should offer.

In the interpretative stage, we had inferences in the discourse categories as a whole, as well as in linguistic expressions. According to Flick (2006), "data interpretation is the core of a qualitative research". However, it is necessary to remember that the study cannot assure a complete exemption of glances caused by responses of interpretations of its researchers. The researchers of the study took care to avoid pre-understandings on themes, and they carefully examined interpretations accomplished by them by means of a general frame structured with fragmented pieces obtained in the interviews.

## RESULTS

Based on the empirical perceptions gathered from the data analysis, we present categories identified as: nostalgia, connection with friends, family, entertainment, solitude, religion, habitus, and regional identity.

### Nostalgia

Family origins have a great influence on past remembrance, as well as on food consumption as exemplified thus:

"I used to be starving; my father put apart all his sons. We had nothing to put into a pan. I was starving in my mother's uterus. When I look to the past, I remember those things and I become disconnected".

Food can also raise some emotions linked to memory. Some kinds of food can make us remember someone or some place by means of the affective and pleasant dimension linked to it by means of a remembrance. Then

food appears as a triggering element that allows the activation of a remembrance of something distant – thus, tempering or stressing the sorrows of longing. The symbolical meaning of feeding sends us to the world of affections and emotions as exemplified thus:

"When my parents were alive, we used to eat lunch and dinner together (speechless with emotion; blocked voice) and I felt good. My father loved beans and maize cream, while my mother preferred fried potatoes (a single person and also a singleton)".

According to Schouten (1991), feeding nourishes identities and rebuilds social needs. Symbolic aspects of feeding have a strong affective matrix due to its origin in the household scenery related to "living together", which is very linked to the mother and woman figures as subsequently exemplified:

"When I lived with my mom, I used to eat in a gourd. The typical food was grits and beans. We had a vegetable garden home that received my mother's cares (during this time, I perceived a look of happiness and homesickness)".

The researcher of this study states his conversation with one of his interviewees about "living together":

"When I started my conversation with D. Tereza about food, the first thing she did was to catch a picture album to show me a picture of her mother, D. Lúcia. After the interview, she asked me if I had some extra time. When I answered positively, she took more picture albums and showed all the pictures saying something about them".

Childhood remembrances considered as a part of a cultural construction, being helpful to elaborate feeding habits of an adult consumer have already been described by Ackerman (1991). This idea has been exemplified in relation to senior people:

"I remember our lunch time when I was a child. My father and mother join every son around the table and each one had a specific place".

Types of food become a symbol of internal stability. Ties between past and present are a demonstration of symbolical instance, considering that past flavors always afloat. According to Sally (1995), it is difficult to place in a food all the special meanings that it grant for the human existence in terms of significance.

### Connection with friends

The social dimension that includes food preparation and feeding pleasures in a conversation with other people sitting around is able to underline a lack of

communication. It is the value of a good conversation during the meals that highlights some pleasures that is derived from the food. "Once in a month we use to join (the widows of my district). Each one prepares a dish (a cake, some cheese bread, a maze flour cake...), then we pray, we talk and we laugh a lot".

The significance of the influence can also be evidenced due to the importance that elderly women confer to praises that they receive when they prepare some specific dish for a meeting. This demonstrates that further opinions in some way seem to intervene in their food choices. The analysis shows that the main element of a good meal includes not only tasteful dishes, but also what seems to be yet more essential: social interaction. A testimony that caught our attention was:

"During the balls, I do not eat. I prefer eating at home. I am here to enjoy, dance and meet new friends". In that moment, I perceived that the tables in the saloon always had bottles of mineral water and some beer bottles. For all the time, I stayed at the ball – around 3 h – no food has been served".

Another testimony that needs to be highlighted is:

"My son and my daughter-in-law invite me to lunch in their home every day, but I do not want to bother them. I prefer to look for a place of mine. I am never alone. I know people very easily, I am a communicative person, and everybody knows me in restaurants. So I take the opportunity to be acquainted by someone and make new friends". I lunched with my interviewee and indeed I perceived that he was a man very known by the owner and even by the cooks. For him, to eat out means to know more people".

A good companionship is a way to divert attention of a severe everyday feeding routine, once it can allow breaking rules and consuming forbidden or excessive food on short-term.

During an event (jogging and a violist player), one of the elderly women was asked what she intended to eat and she answered me:

"I will try each kind of food. Today I can take advantage of this. After, I will go to the fitness center. Eating is a pleasure in life, but I exaggerate sometimes, especially in events of our group".

## Family

According to Barbosa (2007), we do not eat in a random way and every society establishes rules and specific meals. Food is always eaten in a cultured way.

Casotti (2002) has already approached the continuity of "rice and beans" culture in Brazilian homes as an aspect

of cultural identity related to the household and familiarity. In this way, family – besides the group of reference that influences most the consumption of food – is also the main element responsible for the transfer of feeding cultural meanings, once habits are passed from one generation to another as exemplified thus:

"I prefer eating simple food. I dislike red meat, but my son appreciates it. I always prepare chicken or fish steak and some red meat in our meals. I enjoy preparing and pleasing family. I like to arrange the table, even with simple dishes. We always try to have lunch together".

For Gregory et al. (1990), people that integrate a residence are important to determine and decide which food will be consumed by an elderly consumer, thus revealing that the preference of some familiar member regarding some kind of food can be a factor conclusive for food purchase.

Family influences choice and stimulate food preparation. Food selection is influenced by habits and tradition (Warde, 2005) as exemplified thus:

"I like cooking, arranging the table for my husband and (married) son. He launches everyday with us".

These testimonies confirm the trend highlighted by Casotti (2002) that a meal with the family is understood by elderly people as a kind of preservation of familiar nucleus. As can be seen, the relational aspect of Brazilian society is perceived on consumption relations; family relations are stimulus to prepare or not to prepare some food.

From another perspective, a lack of sharing is an inhibiting factor for food preparation. In some cases, the death of a companion and sons that live in another place can be retraction factors. An interviewee explains thus:

"When I became a widow, I lost some of my interest to cook because we were companions in the kitchen. Even when he could not help me, he was always around (married for 52 years) (she cried a lot, so we made a break)".

Relations between interviewees and their relatives are reasons for the consumption or forbidding of many kinds of food.

## Entertainment

"A meal is a fraternization moment". For Malinowski (2003), the importance of parties is linked to the preparing and exhibition of dishes as subsequently exemplified:

"When I could stay in birthday's celebrations, I noted a

relation of elderly people with the preparing of dishes and their joy when receiving guests. It is a moment of entertainment, freedom and so much laughing". "When the springtime starts, I use to prepare a tea meeting here, in my home. Each guest offers a flower vase that we raffle or willingly exchange through the group. I organize everything. I buy some diet sodas for Tereza, some cheese fingers for Neuza, some cheese bread for Paulo... and, at last, I recite a poem, a moment for which everybody waits".

Rozin (1995) establishes that to study feeding behavior, one need to pay attention to terminologies: uses, preferences, and tastes. Uses demonstrate what we eat and the quantity of each food; preferences are related to a situation that establishes choice criteria between one or more types of food; and tastes indicate which are the kinds of food that pleases more, the taste of a group or a person, que las propiedades sensoriales de la comida producen placer a esa persona (which sensorial properties of a food produce pleasure for a person).

During the study's interviews, it was observed that there was a difference between the everyday food and the weekend food. During working days, there is a care related to the health and nutritional aspects. During weekends, there is an exaggeration in food preparation and a higher level of refinement, especially in the choice of a menu. Addis and Holbrook (2001) mention a feeding arrangement in subsystems of meals: working day meals, weekend meals and ritual food (for specific celebrations). We perceive that there is a difference between them according to the following narration:

"I have my meal everyday. I turn the radio on while preparing my lunch. My food is simple: some beans, some rice, yam soup, some collard and some meat. Only on Sundays I eat pasta".

Party meetings occur in a situation of "food abundance" – with some potlachian consumption signals (Mauss, 1985). The notes of this study demonstrate that the main elements of a good meal include not only tasteful dishes, but also what seems to be more essential: social interaction.

According to Levi-Strauss (1975), a food prepared in special situations is important to "honor"; it is a support for creation and keeping of social relations and is not devoted only to "feed", as is the case of our everyday food.

### **Solitude**

In this study's interviews, the researchers noted how food is inseparable of elderly life, evidenced by further questions that emerged during their conversations as, for example, solitude. Talking about food sent to other

symbolical constructs, the following extract can be exemplified thus:

"I usually lunch alone because my husband and daughter have different times, due to work and studies. I do not have a good care with my food once it is very unpleasant to lunch alone".

We understand that food delimitates a set of expressions of meanings and significances that configure a kind of language inside a symbolical universe, then solitude causes a personal emptiness. Feeding choices are a part of an exercise of autonomy that people accomplish for themselves and their families. It is remarkable to know the sadness that elderly people present from solitude. Feeding is sometimes a factor of insulation and no more of socialization.

### **Religion**

There is another strong point to be considered: religiosity. A prayer is a commitment in the feeding routine, presenting a moment of submission of the "ego". We highlighted some excerpts:

"I pray every day before my meals to thank God for the sacred food".

Food encompasses emotion and works with our feelings. The act of being nourished is full of our own symbolisms and significances. For example, "during mankind history, some people, like saints and mystics, choose to starve due to religious reasons" (Giddens, 2006). Jesus symbolized eternal life through bread and wine sharing. The Catholic society has the symbolical function of life interlaced in food (Sancho, 2005).

### **Habitus**

For Bourdieu (1979), "feeding preferences is the most resistant and permanent component of habitus" and, as a consequence, the most difficult to be modified. When we affirm that there is an imposition of feeding practices before the standardization of the feeding routine, we understand that it encompasses a highly complex apprenticeship, as subsequently exemplified:

"I forwent my culture to be happy beside my husband. I had to learn to prepare and eat German food".

This study observes with more accuracy such characteristics due to the standardization of conducts, predisposing an extremely rigid social organization, an emptying of the "ego". It was noted that elderly women play a role of protagonists, being responsible for the

family food. DaMatta (1986) mentioned that nourishment is something that concerns all human beings, but food is something that defines a domain. Here are some excerpts from the interview conducted as regards habitus:

“When I got married, first of all I had to serve food to my husband, and only after that I could have my meal”. “I like to be served by my woman. I never take my food by myself”.

The popular habitus is present in the representation of what food means to people in our interviews: “rice and beans” or “rice-beans-salad-meat”. Casotti (2002) perceived a cultural identity and an affection of Brazilian people related to “rice and beans”. Here is another excerpt from the interview conducted:

“My parents had many children. We were poor and they could buy some rice and beans to give support to the family and, sometimes, some meat”.

The discourse of my interviewees proved that rice and beans are very traditional in Brazilian gastronomy and considered as an essential food. The expression “to give support” explains the differentiation between primary kinds of food – those that can not be absent of the main Brazilian meal, that is, the lunch – and those that we eat just as ‘complementary’ food”.

Popular feeding habitus is linked to body representations. In the interviews, it was perceived that elderly people are very proud of themselves and there is a concern related to the welfare, body, and a desire of living well as exemplified thus:

“I go to several events organized by the association: joggings, touring, balls, swimming pool gymnastic three times a week, and bodybuilding twice a week. And I also try to get a healthy food because I want to be a helpful elderly person. I have to take care of my body so as not to depend on other people”.

In this research, it was perceived that preference, habitus, and consumption choice have really cultural origins. They present factors of heredity, being passed from generation to generation in some cases.

### **Regional identity**

Here is an excerpt for regional identity:

“I was born in Paraíba state. I lived there until I was 20 years old. When I relocated to Minas Gerais state, they offered me some watery beans and I disliked them. I only eat beans prepared with pieces of bacon and jerky”.

Food appears as an identity marker and as a regional

distinction. Acculturation studies of consumers (Penaloza, 1994) demonstrate that for people that have been geographically relocated and who live in a new familiar culture, food presents new significances and reinforces the (sub) cultural, ethnical and individual identity. Here is another excerpt:

“I prepare two meals, one for me and another for my husband, and that persists in the same habits of his parents (grease, fried food, just a few vegetables). I only eat light food, I love salad but it has to be diversified. I have an active life”.

### **Conclusion**

One of the main motivations for the study was to explore a field of knowledge not much explored in the sector of consumer studies – the so-called “senior consumer”. Besides being a numerically significant population, it has an enormous invisibility because it has been put in a second ground by companies, research bodies and marketing researchers in their investigations, with rare exceptions.

From the general purpose enounced, the study persisted in investigations on how feeding consumption experiences interact with the cultural and symbolical systems encompassed in the flow of the everyday social life of elderly people. We choose the use of a qualitative methodology of ethnographic inspiration.

The use of qualitative techniques have been suitable to catch the subjectivity and richness of contents that involve this theme, besides the possibility of deep interviews, which have been effective for data collection next to the elderly public. In this way, McDaniel and Gates (2006) mention that there is nothing better than a qualitative research to understand consumer feelings and motivations with deepness.

By means of the interview analysis, it was perceived that culture has an essential importance for food consumption. Food is a part of the life of consumers that have been studied in the most expected and common situations of an everyday life as opportunities of entertainment, source of information, health, family and friends, routine and sadness. Food is presented as an expression of personal identity, representing a symbolical value for the elderly people life.

Thus, based on empirical perceptions collected from data analysis, several categories emerged from the study and have been useful to explain phenomena such as nostalgia, connection with friends, family, entertainment, solitude, religion, habitus, and regional identity.

After the interviews, it was observed that food is inseparable from the life of elderly people, what has been evidenced by further questions that emerged, such as the solitude. Talking about food sends us to other symbolical constructs.

Familiar origins also have a strong influence in past

remembrances, as well as in food consumption. Some narrations confirmed a trend supported by Casotti (2002) that eating with the family is considered by elderly people a way of preservation of the family core. Familiar relations are stimuli for food preparation. On the other side, the lack of sharing is an inhibiting factor for food preparation. In some cases, the death of a companion and the sons that let some to live in other places are considered as retraction factors by many elderly people.

Eating is not an isolated action. Food encompasses emotion, works with memory and feelings. The expression "mom's food" evokes childhood, comfort, and sends us to something "familiar" (Field, 1999). The major part of elderly people - when they talk about food - can rescue moments of childhood, remembering situations of joy and sadness; and many times, they weep.

Food appears as an identity and regional distinction marker. Acculturation studies of consumers (Penaloza, 1994) demonstrate that food can present new meanings for people who are geographically displaced and inserted in a new familiar culture.

A religious subject appears in the study and demonstrates how we can have a considerable level of homogeneity in consumption practices that are possibly related to some religious ethos. A prayer is a commitment in the feeding routine for elderly people, describing a moment of submission for the "ego".

One of the purposes of this paper was to stimulate the interest for the approach of cultural variables in consumption process as well as to put the segment of senior people in a research of consumer behavior. Also in the academic scenery, it is valid to mention that the scientific rigor of conduct for this study gives support to its credence and at the same time reinforces the basic condition to integrate the set of Brazilian production of knowledge.

Finally, a suggestion for further researches is the continuity of the insertion of cultural and symbolical variables in feeding behavior, but allowing investigations that are closely related to elderly consumers in a larger way. This work can be considered a basis for further studies of another methodological origin that could include larger samples in a geographical and sociocultural viewpoint. This study poses as a challenge for further researches in sectors of marketing and consumer behavior. However, more studies need to be accomplished from an interdisciplinary perspective that could reveal nuances and gradations of the complex social acts related to consumption.

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