The meaning of the food practices of the peoples of Mmotla, near Pretoria, South Africa: A socio-cultural and socio-psychological approach

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Thesis

PhD Cons Sc (Food Management)

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Co-supervisor: Prof Dr CC Boonzaaier

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The meaning of the food practices of the peoples of Mmotla, near Pretoria, South Africa: A socio-cultural and socio-psychological approach

by

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Thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree

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Department of Consumer Science

University of Pretoria

Supervisor: Prof Dr P Botha
Co-supervisor: Prof Dr CC Boonzaaier

October 2009
I, Annemarie Therese Viljoen, hereby declare that the thesis for the PhD in Consumer Science degree at the University of Pretoria, hereby submitted by me, has not previously been submitted for a degree at this or any other university and that it is my own work in design and execution and that all reference material contained herein has been duly acknowledged.

ANNEMARIE TERESE VILJOEN

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In this study the aim was to describe and understand how meanings emerge from the context in which the food practices of the peoples of Mmotla were construed. South African society is multi-cultural and black South Africans, upon contact with Western-oriented societies, seem to have gradually or partially adopted the Western lifestyle including eating patterns, leading to changing traditional food practices that can be mostly attributed to the effect of acculturation, urbanisation and modernisation processes.

The current knowledge base of food practices of the South African population as a whole is fragmentary, with limited information on what some sectors of certain population groups eat. Inadequate attention is paid to the reasons why specific food items are chosen or excluded. To facilitate meaningful consumer education and to recommend sound nutrition interventions, a thorough understanding of why as well as what South Africans eat is urgently needed. Moreover, cognisance should be taken of the factors that contribute to the development of typical food practices within specific communities.

As confirmed in various studies in other countries, the reasons for human food choices require an appreciation of the fact that food practices are embedded in the food choice processes which, in turn are guided by numerous interrelated and interdependent factors that are context-specific. A holistic and contextual approach with knowledge of the socio-cultural, psychological, historical and demographic factors that contribute to food practices should be
uncovered when attempting to understand and describe these practices and their underlying meanings.

The human ecological perspective, as overarching theoretical perspective, is supported by cultural and symbolic interactionism perspectives and other theoretical models, and combined with a qualitative research design to uncover, describe and interpret all the environmental levels, the physical, politico-economic, socio-cultural and the micro-world of the individual, and their embedded factors. Data was obtained from focus group discussions and interviews, supported by participant observation and unobtrusive measures. Purposive sampling was used to select female participants for the focus groups and theoretical sampling for the individual interviews. Gathered data was systematically analysed according to the grounded theory approach throughout the data collection phase.

From the findings it became apparent that the food practices of the peoples in Mmotla continue to develop and change. A distinct move towards the modern Western-oriented food practices emerged. Although acculturation of food practices was evident, traditional food practices were not discarded, and both traditional and modern food practices were embraced and regarded as important. Meanings linked to the socio-cultural and socio-psychological environments were used to define the context in which food items were used as symbols, signs or codes to define a specific situation and/or communicate the associated meanings. This resulted in dynamic movement between the two poles, the modern and the traditional, depending on the context. Thus the acculturation response is consequently seen to be fluid, context-specific and driven by various interacting factors from the different environmental levels.

This valuable and noteworthy contribution augments existing theories and models on food choice within the South African context.

**Keywords:** food choice, food practices, food context, traditional food, meanings, acculturation, human ecological perspective, symbolic interactionism, cultural perspective
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