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ABSTRACT

The aim of this study was to explore everyday thinking patterns related to new foods within the theoretical framework of social representations. New foods were categorized in this study as functional, genetically modified, nutritionally modified, organically produced, and ethnic foods. Relating to new foods in contemporary societies is ambivalent, varying from enthusiasm to suspicion and opposition. New foods provide a fertile ground for the formation of social representations focusing on everyday understanding and familiarization of the new and the unknown. Altogether 3242 Finnish respondents, aged 15-88, participated in this study, consisting of five separate data sets: demographically segmented focus groups (N = 44); three large-scale surveys (2001, N = 734; 2002, N = 1156; 2004, N = 1113); and an experimental design (N = 62). All data sets were collected between years 2001 and 2004. Using the focus group discussions as a starting point, a questionnaire of social representations of new foods was developed. The results given by this 27-item questionnaire were then explored and verified by using three data sets over a three-year period.

The survey results showed that the social representation of new foods comprised five components of thinking of new foods: suspicion of new foods, adherence to technology, adherence to natural food, eating as an enjoyment, and eating as a necessity. This finding supports previous studies stating that relating to food includes contradictions between, e.g., nature and technology, traditional and modern, and safe and risky. The social representation components showed great stability during the three-year period, that is, from one population to another.

It was found that the social representation components were linked to traditionally used attitude and trait scales of food neophobia, change seeking, and domain specific innovativeness. Specifically, high suspicion correlated strongly with food neophobia, while low suspicion and enjoyment correlated with innovativeness and change seeking. The predictive ability of the social representation components was particularly good regarding the willingness to try and use functional products, genetically modified food, and organic products. The core of the representation was found to be trust, as a counterpart of suspicion, while natural and technological were its opposite themata. Theoretically, the core and the themata are stable, while individual variation is expressed in relation to the measurable components. The findings of this interdisciplinary study are applicable both to the social representation theory and to the study of new foods within food science.