

Application of the Word Association Cognitive Technique in the Evaluation of Food Safety Perception

Marina L. Mitterer-Dalton*

Department of Chemistry, Federal Technological University of Parana, 85503-390, Pato Branco, Parana, Brazil

*Corresponding author: Marina L. Mitterer-Dalton, Department of Chemistry, Federal Technological University of Parana, 85503-390, Pato Branco, Parana, Brazil, Tel: 55 (46) 3220 2596; E-mail: marinadalton@utfpr.edu.br

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Abstract

This opinion article aims to highlight the use of the Word Association technique (WA) as a food safety tool, as evidenced in the article by J.M. Latorres and coauthors. The application of this cognitive technique revealed two interesting results: a) the importance of the constant participation and improvement of professionals in the food area when the subject is food security; and b) the immediate associations with the stimuli employed that were made by each group studied. The application of the technique also allowed for the verification of changes or improvements in the perceptions referring to the subjects related to food safety after the training courses, which demonstrated their efficacy. Once again this reinforces the importance of the propagation and re-propagation of knowledge with professionals in the food area, which, as a practical consequence implies in a reduction in the risks of foodborne diseases.

Keywords: Associations; Food handler; Capacitation course; Stimulus

Introduction

The importance of the role of food in people's lives is unquestionable, and within this context the theme of food safety is gaining strength every day, principally due to its strong relationship with diverse foodborne diseases. Since it is known that knowledge of food safety directly influences attitudes related to food safety, the constant need for training courses aimed at food handlers is evident. The importance of the use of training courses related to food safety given by professionals from the food area is often reported [1-3], and the importance of periodically taking these courses again was evidenced in the work of JM Latorres and coauthors, since the experiments were done with a target public which had already taken training courses involving the themes of food safety and good hygiene practices.

The authors worked with two different groups of food handlers, one consisting of cooks responsible for the handling of school meals at public schools, and the other formed by students from a public agricultural technical school. Through the use of the Word Association cognitive technique (not previously explored in the analysis of concepts related to food safety), the authors of the article entitled Cognitive evaluation as a food safety tool - a food handler case study discovered there was prior knowledge on the part of the food handlers regarding issues related to food safety before taking the training course, which addressed theoretical and practical concepts of importance and care in food handling as related to food safety. However, they highlighted the positive effect resulting from taking the course, with respect to the aggregation or enhancement of the participants' knowledge [4]. That is, the participants said they had already had some kind of training related to the issues discussed above and demonstrated awareness of these matters, but what stands out is that after the course they showed greater understanding, something

which could mean the aggregation of knowledge or simply the activation of memory, remembering and strengthening previous knowledge.

The Word Association technique was the instrument used to reach this conclusion. Applied before and after the training course, this methodology is based on the principle that the first associations of participants facing certain stimuli are the most important, since they reveal authentically what participants know/think about the topic discussed [5].

In addition to proving the importance of the constant improvement of food handlers concerning issues related to food safety, the WA technique revealed that the concepts represented by the cognitively formed dimensions or categories better explained the stimulus applied to the handler groups. For the cooks, the stimulus "Food handling" was represented by the associations "Hygiene" and "Preparation/process", whereas the "Well prepared food" stimulus was related to the "Proper seasoning" and "Care with child." The results also revealed that before the course, the stimulus "Good Manufacturing Practices" was perceived specifically by the subjective dimensions of "Affection" and "Wisdom", but that more objective terms came up after the course.

The stimulus applied to the public agricultural technical school students was "Food Safety", which revealed a larger set of technical associations when compared to those of the 'lunch ladies' group, such as "inspection", "good practices" and "sanitization".

In addition to demonstrating the difference in technical knowledge between the two groups, the study showed that, for both groups, the Word Association cognitive technique resulted in the emergence of associations related to affection, respect, dedication, protection and responsibility, which made the sense of responsibility of the professionals and future professionals in the food area clear.

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