

Commensality
defines as fellowship
at table sociology
essay



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Commensality is eating with other people, and commensal eating patterns reflect the social relationships of individuals (1). According to Mennell et al., (1992), the relationship between food, eating, and society will be discussed in a range of ways that include commensality. Until recently, sociologists expressed relatively little interest in what we eat, how we prepare and consume food, how we feel about it and why. Paradoxically, when the relationship between food, eating and society is discussed, this is often in functionalist terms of commensality, that is, the social significance of living and eating together that is thought to lie at the heart of our sociality. Yet, from time to time, changes take place in the way our structures and interactions are perceived and prioritised.

In addition, when children opened their lunch boxes, they displayed some of the opportunities and constraints of familial food choices. In effect, 'home' was made visible. The data also illustrated that women's position in the domestic division of labour was intimately linked to the distribution of food, including that consumed at school. In interviews, parents explained that their influence over what went into the box was mediated by several factors which, together, were described in terms of eating compromises or 'bargains'. The combination of (predominantly) mothers' ideas about what was nutritionally balanced with their positioning of a 'snack' meal as a stop-gap to the main meal event in the evening, was mediated not only by children's food preferences but also by what was affordable and practically stored in a lunch box.

Most people get married or spend time living with a partner at some stage in their lives. But what effect does this change have, if any, on their eating

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habits? The transition from bachelor or spinster to young couple represents a major lifecourse change and this paper looks at the role that eating together plays in the lives of a group of young Scottish couples recently married or cohabiting with their partner. The key question here is what role do meals play in all of this and how are eating activities arranged in these households. In an attempt to move the debate on meals beyond the “ traditional family unit” it considers what eating “ properly” meant for these couples. The paper looks at the importance of the evening meal as a site for sociability in married and cohabiting couples and examines the process of social interaction, focusing on temporal and spatial aspects of eating together as a couple. It reports on what men and women said in individual interviews and recorded in personal food diaries, contrasting this with their behaviour when they were living separately from their partners (1)

A study explained usual meal partners in commensal units and frequency of eating with others in commensal circles among 663 adults responding to a mailed questionnaire in one community. Meal partner data revealed that most respondents ate alone at breakfast, alone or with co-workers at lunch, and with family members at dinner. Commensal frequency data revealed some eating at the homes of other family members, little eating at friends' homes, and almost no eating at neighbors' homes. Few demographic variations existed in commensal eating, except that unmarried individuals more often ate breakfast and dinner alone and more often ate with friends. These findings suggest that contemporary work-oriented society may lead people to eat alone during the day but share evening meals with family, and that people maintain commensal relationships primarily with family

members rather than friends or neighbors. Peoples' social worlds appear to be focused on the nuclear family, and family members are also the people they usually eat with (2).

According to findings from a qualitative study of views and understandings of dietary practices in middle class families. Thirty five parents/main food providers of boys and girls aged 13/14 years, living in Eastern Scotland, were interviewed about their and their teenagers' everyday lives, food, health and family practices. One of our aims was to understand more about the social and cultural conditions which might be promoting more positive dietary health and physical well-being amongst middle class families. Most parents' accounts appeared rooted in a taken-for-grantedness that family members enjoyed good health, lived in relatively secure and unthreatening environments regarding health and resources, and were able to lead active lives, which they valued. Although controlling teenagers' eating practices was presented as an ongoing challenge, active supervision and surveillance of their diets was described, as was guiding tastes in 'the right direction'. Parents described attempts to achieve family eating practices such as commensality, cooking from scratch, and encouraging a varied and nutritional 'adult' diet and cosmopolitan tastes, though work and activities could compromise these. These middle class families might be characterized as having future oriented 'hierarchies of luxury and choice', in which controlling and moulding teenagers' food practices and tastes was assigned a high priority (3).

As well as, Murcott (1988) has pointed out, public and fictional allegiance to the importance of shared meals persists, along with anxiety about their

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supposed decline. Together, anxiety about what, how, and with whom we eat has surfaced in relation to the health and physical well-being of adults and children and in cultural concerns about the disintegration of family life and values(4).

The above mentioned studies illustrate that commensality in school can and does show a variety of formations. This applies also to understandings about parental choice and influence. At Fieldgate School, family influences were revealed more directly because children brought to school visible aspects of their home life, albeit contained in a school lunch box. Such influences were reinforced and thwarted by a variety of other factors, including peer group influence, but overall, parental choice was considered paramount.

It should be the responsibility of both home and school, both really. I mean we need food to grow so that should be an educational thing and also put into practice at home via the parents. Food needs to be taught properly. As well as, the experience of becoming the provider of their own food changes the students' food behaviors and representations. Diet quality, patterns of commensality and social representations of food provide input for developing healthy diet care and health promotion (5).

According to ALLEN et al., (1970) the strongest relations occurred among the nutrition factors and family commensality was the most influential. The degree of family commensality was related not only to increase in food likes and dietary adequacy but also to health and academic performance. Food likes and diet adequacy were both correlated with academic skills, work rating, expectation of success and college preparation.

Conclusion:

Sharing meals together, both in terms of common understandings about their construction and the social rules which govern behaviour, is thought to be the very essence of sociality. The individualisation of our eating habits, it is claimed, means that both meals, and by implication, critical aspects of our sociality are disappearing (Burnett, 1989). In response, education has been advocated as a mechanism to halt a trend which is thought to threaten our health, our family life, and our sense of social cohesion. Set at the interface between home and school, the above mentioned papers have explored commensality at home and school, and has considered the overlap between the two, using data which prioritise the views of parents and, to a lesser extent children, rather than the perspectives of educationalists, nutritionists, or teachers. Advocates of nutritional improvement in children's diets have stressed the importance of a school meals service. The discussion of eating provision in school highlights the complex issues underpinning this assertion, not only in terms of nutritional impact but also in relation to the sociality of eating and the cross-cutting effects of institutional practice, socioeconomic advantage and disadvantage (discussed also by Dobson et al., 1994), and cultural preference.

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