



Sociability performed around eating: a study with university students

A sociabilidade exercida em torno do comer: um estudo entre universitários

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Abstract

The relationship between mankind and food surpasses the physiological aspects of feeding and is marked by commensality. The aim of this study is to understand the senses and meanings of eating by university students at a higher education institution, based on the notion of eating as a sociocultural act and object of socio-anthropological knowledge. The study is descriptive and has a qualitative approach. A survey was conducted between August and December 2014, with students from a private university in the city of Santa Maria, Rio Grande do Sul. Data was collected through recorded interviews which were transcribed and analyzed according to the content analysis technique. Ten students from several programs – both males and females – were interviewed. It could be seen that the students' eating behavior is socially and culturalallt influenced. One could also observe an effect of globalization and time on the eating habits of respondents. Further research on this topic is suggested, as it is a very broad field that allows another perspective to feeding which is not always exploited by nutrition.

Keywords: Feeding Behavior. Feeding. Socialization. Culture.

Resumo

A relação existente entre o homem e a comida ultrapassa os aspectos fisiológicos da alimentação e é marcada pela comensalidade. O objetivo deste estudo é compreender os sentidos e significados do ato alimentar de universitários de uma instituição de ensino superior, a partir de uma reflexão que

entende a alimentação como um ato sociocultural e objeto do saber socioantropológico. O estudo caracteriza-se por ser do tipo descritivo, com abordagem qualitativa. A pesquisa foi realizada entre os meses de agosto e dezembro de 2014, com estudantes de uma instituição privada de ensino superior do município de Santa Maria, Rio Grande do Sul. A coleta dos dados foi feita por meio de entrevistas gravadas, as quais foram transcritas e analisadas conforme a técnica de análise de conteúdo. Foram entrevistados dez alunos, de ambos os sexos e de variados cursos. Foi possível notar a influência social e cultural no comportamento alimentar dos estudantes. Também ficou evidente o reflexo da globalização e do tempo nas práticas alimentares dos entrevistados. Sugere-se a realização de novas pesquisas com esse tema, visto ser um campo bastante amplo e que possibilita um outro olhar à alimentação que nem sempre é explorado pela nutrição.

Palavras-chave: Comportamento Alimentar. Alimentação. Socialização. Cultura.

Introduction

The relationship between man and food goes beyond the physiological aspects of food and is marked by commensality. Carneiro¹ states that “Food, besides being a biological necessity, is a complex symbolic system of social, sexual, political, religious, ethical, esthetic meanings.” Men themselves modify the meaning of food consumption, giving it some cultural meaning by turning eating rituals into some way of socializing.²

DaMatta³ distinguishes between food and aliment, in which “food is not just some food substance but is also some eating mode, style and way. And the way of eating defines not only what is ingested, but also the one who ingests it.” Thus, what is placed on the plate nourishes the body but also signals belonging, acting as some code of social recognition.^{3,4}

For Bosi & Prado,⁵ the expressions “food” and “nutrition” comprise distinct scientific aspects. Nutrition is the rationalization of the food act, prioritizing measurable aspects of food. And the food field refers to the food act as some social phenomenon.

Santos⁶ also suggests that “Eating is a nutritional act, ingesting is a social act, because it constitutes attitudes related to uses, customs, protocols, behaviors and situations. No food that enters our mouths is neutral. The historicity of gastronomic sensibility explains and is explained by cultural and social manifestations as some mirror of an era and that have marked an era [...]”⁶

Carneiro⁷ reveals that the history of food has some greater purpose than that of studying specific food, form of preparation, recipe or tradition. Its main challenge is to approach food in its greater importance as a symbol. In favor of this, Carvalho, Luz & Prado⁸ believe that, historically, food is a symbol of wealth for man and over time it is able to reveal the formation of social structures from the time when man differed from other animals in preparing and socializing food. Thus, the history of food encompasses much more than food, its production, preparation and consumption.

Food, its habits and changes involve numerous relations of factors. For Carneiro,¹ “What one eats is just as important as when one eats, where one eats, how one eats and with whom one eats.” In physiological terms, food only loses importance in human survival for respiration and water intake.¹ The act of feeding surpasses the physiological question of the search for nutrients, going beyond, constructing customs and rituals, generating relations between individuals and society, so that social life is constituted together with food.⁸

Over the course of time, there have been significant changes in dietary behavior influenced by a number of factors, including the lack of day-to-day time, increasingly imposing some practical and fast diet. Giddens⁹ states that the way of life produced by modernity frees us from any traditional type of social order and one of its characteristics is the evident rhythm of change, although the ritualistic nature still exists. As for such transformations, Garcia¹⁰ cites urbanization as one of the factors. She states that, due to time, food rituals are being altered and moved to places that are consistent with other activities, such as in work or entertainment times.

Based on the foregoing, the present work aims to understand the senses and meanings of college students' eating activities at a higher education institution based on some reflection that understands eating as some socio-cultural act and an object of socio-anthropological knowledge.

Methodology

The present study is characterized by being of a descriptive type with a qualitative approach. According to Lefèvre & Lefèvre,¹¹ qualitative research gives us the opportunity to deeply understand social fields and their meanings, referring to several interrelated meanings present in the statements. The research was carried out between August and December 2014 with students from a private higher education institution in the Brazilian municipality of Santa Maria, Rio Grande do Sul.

Eighteen-year old people and older were interviewed, of both genders and enrolled in the institution, who agreed to participate in the study through prior clarification and upon signing

an Informed Consent Form (ICF). This population was chosen because it presented varied characteristics (age, gender, occupation, income, children etc.), which was considered important in this research since it provided a broader view on the subject.

Participants were chosen randomly and according to availability to participate on the days when the researcher carried out the data collection, which was on varied days of the week and in the morning, afternoon and evening shifts. In a qualitative research there is no need for sample calculation, according to Mayan.¹² The collection shall cease when all categories are saturated by data, which happens when no significant data appear, all paths have been followed and the theory is confirmed.

Data collection was done through recorded interviews using a semistructured script with guiding questions developed by the researcher for this study.

At the end of each interview the material was transcribed in its entirety and the data were then analyzed using the content analysis technique proposed by Bardin,¹³ which is divided into three phases: pre-analysis, exploitation of material and processing of results, inference and interpretation. In the pre-analysis the researcher does a floating reading and then performs the operation of clipping the text in comparable units of categorization for thematic analysis and coding modality for the registration of the data. In the exploration of the material, operations of codification, enumeration, classification and aggregation take place, according to previously formulated rules. And in processing the results, inference and interpretation of the raw information is processed as for being meaningful. With these significant data, the researcher can propose inferences and interpretations about the objectives intended.

This research was approved by the Research Ethics Committee (REC) of the Brazilian university Centro Universitário Franciscano under document no. 775,964. To ensure anonymity, respondents' names were replaced by the letter "I" (interviewed) followed by the interview order number.

Results and Discussion

Ten students of the institution in question, aged between 18 and 38, of both genders and from varied courses, such as psychology, physiotherapy, philosophy, pedagogy, social services, nursing and nutrition were interviewed. From the analysis of the interviews, two categories emerged: *Socio-cultural aspects of eating and reflections of globalization on eating behaviors.*

Sociocultural Aspects of Eating

This category addresses the relationship between social and cultural aspects and eating activities. In the majority of the testimonies, the importance and the direct link that the social relations have with the moment of the meal became clear. According to Carneiro,⁷ the act of eating, for the most part, is not an act that is carried out on its own and this is the origin of socialization since even the language may have been developed by human beings in order to obtain food, besides the creation of other cultural tools with the same objective. The concept of socialization is understood by Bauman¹⁴ as the individual's interaction with the social structure. Thus, the practice of eating would have as one of its objectives to insert individuals into society.

The individuals' act in carrying out meals surpasses the physiological questions of the organism and plays a much broader role, according to the following reports:

[...] It is food that makes people have bigger ties, because always, you can see, if the group wants to do something, there must be something to eat together. Everything involving people involves food. It is that food has a strong affective bond [...]. (11)

[...] In my life, it's a time for us to be together [...] And whenever you call someone, it is for something related to food. You never call someone just for conversation. (13)

[...] Because especially in the family the moment of the table, the meal, is the moment of conversation. Meal times end up being an affective tie. (17)

I think it's a matter of bonds. And also the moment beyond the meal is a way of creating bonds, conversation [...] I think it's crucial. I prioritize it when I can. I always try to be involved with people and what unites us is food. (19)

The interviewees related the meal time to a moment of conversation and interaction among the people, recognizing the social side of food. For Lévi-Strauss,¹⁵ food is not only for eating but also for thinking and communicating. In the speeches the importance of eating together is evident, showing again the sociability exercised in this practice. For Carneiro,⁷ commensality is seen as the act of eating together, sharing the food. He states that it is such an old procedure that even animal species practice it. What distinguishes human commensality from that of other animals is that we attribute meanings to this act, which change over time. Flandrin & Montanari¹⁶ believe that men's eating behaviors differ from those of animals not only by the culture and the fact that we prepare the food but also by the social function exercised during meals.

The sociability involved during eating also covers sharing the food and the affective bonds formed or reinforced from this act, as mentioned by the interviewees. According to Assunção,¹⁷ food is associated with affective and social bonds because it brings memories and feelings that make us remember the people with whom we relate.

Culture is another aspect that is closely linked to food. Each place, region or family group have specific customs, traditions and habits, which are typical of their culture. The following statements depict this aspect:

[...] We meet and have traditional barbecues, always on Sundays or holidays. (16)

It is more the question of Sundays, the barbecue... The family lunch that has the barbecue or a risotto and mayonnaise, which is sacred. This would already be cultural. It's already been like this for many years. It doesn't change, you know. My father would do it like that. My older brother also does it with his family. And I think that I'm also going to do it. It's a way to reunite the family. (19)

[...] Every Sunday there's barbecue. It's sacred. Therefore, I think it's a family way too. And that's because it's the only day on which we stop for talking. (19)

As can be seen in the reports, the cultural question directly influences the type of food. Interviewees reported that traditional barbecues are part of their cooking, done mainly on special occasions such as weekends, being something what unites the family. With that, Carvalho, Luz & Prado⁸ present the idea that cuisine and traditions also reflect social life, ways of meeting and sharing food and work, following notions placed by society and culture. Eating together is some way of maintaining relationships. As when satisfying physiological needs, it is also a crucial factor in the evolution of society cultural identity.¹⁶

Thus, food is not only a response to “eating to live” but it is a culturally marked human act, a social phenomenon. Lévi-Strauss,¹⁵ when studying food, would already observe a close relationship between nature and culture, elements mediated by cuisine, where raw (natural) food, when passing through fire, becomes cooked, that is, cultural. For Freitas, Minayo & Fontes,¹⁸ “Nothing is more natural than eating and nothing is more cultural than the shapes, preferences and senses of eating.”

As seen in the interviews, the ritualistic character still exists. Interviewees eat their meals at tables and also use this time to talk:

At home it is always with the family. We are still used to sitting at the table. Everyone has meals together [...] In my house the same thing continues but I see that this has changed a lot because my siblings are already married. Then for them it is already another rhythm [...] Therefore, when my whole family is together, even when it is only my father, mother and I, we still sit and talk. In my house it is still like this but one can see that in other places this has been lost. (14)

Ah! Everybody sits down to eat together but it depends on the day. And we stay at the table talking after eating. But it is not always so, it is when we have the time. (15)

We sort of follow the same pattern every day. Everyone sits together at the same place. The TV is on and we talk like this about what happened on the day or something else. It is like that, almost always the same thing. (18)

Although the interviewees still have certain meals at the table, these moments are influenced by their routines. The time available for eating is according to the day of the week. Some days have more activities than others. Nieble¹⁹ considers that the concept of commensality involves, among other things, sharing food between two or more people, also representing coexistence. She also states that the forms of social production and their consequences in the social and family structure have a direct relation with the meanings that food acquires with the passage of time, determining constant changes in the ways of domestic socialization.

As it can be observed in the reports above, the interviewees still try to preserve the routine of sitting at the table, providing the time necessary for this moment, which, according to Brasil,²⁰ is correct because it is important for the body health and well-being to have regular, unhurried meals, paying attention to what is being eaten, considering that the act of eating is also some source of satisfaction and pleasure.

Other speeches also reinforce this aspect:

In the company of someone, ah... because I think it's some time to get along. I like to be with people at meals like that. (13)

With someone, because, gosh! It is very bad to stay quiet for two hours and not have someone to talk to. Sometimes I pick up the phone and call my mother to talk to her [...]. (15)

I have my meals with someone and I prefer to be with someone. Ah! Because I go on eating and talking [...]. (17)

Mostly in the company of someone from my family. I don't like to eat alone. [...] It's very difficult for me to eat alone. There's always someone together with me. [...] To talk, to not feel alone, to have some amusement. (18)

In the reports above it is possible to perceive that the interviewees prefer to have meals in the company of someone, to talk and share the moment during meals, making that occasion more pleasant. For Carneiro,¹ the word “commensality” derives from the Latin word *mensa*, which means *to be with others at a table*, involving not only what one eats but also how one eats. Thus, commensality has ceased to be considered only something physiological or biological. It is also an important factor for the formation of structures of social organization and sociability is manifested at the time of the meal shared. According to Visser,² eating together places the individual in front of a group, turning the act of eating into some means for social relationships. The word “company” derives from the Latin *companion*, which means *a person with whom we share bread*, which means friendship itself by sharing. A study carried out by Alves & Boog²¹ on eating behavior in a student housing revealed that for 20% of the interviewees the presence of someone does not alter the meal; for 37%, sometimes yes, sometimes no; and for 43%, eating together positively improves the meal.

All interviewees reported having a preference for sharing the meal with someone because they'd have a company to talk to. According to Rodrigues,²² “The act of eating is not an individual one but a social activity. Food should be shared and not consumed individually.” (p. 87) For Ackerman,²³ the other human senses can be appreciated in their entirety when we are alone but the mouthfeel is extraordinarily social, so that humans hardly choose to eat alone.

Food is obviously related to the intake of nutrients but equally important for people's health, well-being and nutrition are the adequate food for the correct supply of nutrients and the social and cultural importance contained in the act of eating, promoting health and stimulating social interaction.²⁰ When analyzing from the nutritional point of view, the ideal is that meals be carried out with someone. According to the last Brazilian government *Guia Alimentar para a População Brasileira* (Food Guide for the Brazilian Population), meals carried out in the company of someone else prevent people from eating quickly and favors eating in more appropriate settings as shared meals require tables and utensils. It also proposes three recommendations that involve the act of eating: eating with other people, regularly and in appropriate environments. The *Guia* also points out that by following these recommendations people shall have a better use of food in the process of digestion, better control over the amount they are ingesting and more time to be with other people.

Another aspect that food provides is the formation of bonds among people and consequently the memories generated:

[...] When I have some latte with toast, I always remember something from my childhood, there in (Brazilian city) Porto Alegre, when my grandmother would prepare toast with coffee and milk. Therefore, I always remember it. And the environment that I remember was with me, my sister and my grandmother [...]. (12)

[...] The school corn starch porridge reminds me of that childhood phase. (13)

[...] Polenta, which reminds me of my childhood, because my father's aunt would make it. We would go to her house and eat polenta with milk, polenta with sugar, and when I eat polenta with sugar I remember my childhood. It's some food that brings me lots of memories. (14)

Grandma's food, mostly stews, cooked with sauce... that grandmother makes very well. It reminds me of childhood, that I spent a lot of time with her. I smell braised onion, garlic, meat and I remember my grandmother. (17)

The foods recalled by the interviewees are loaded with affection and memories. Food has been mentioned and reminded them of someone or some moment. Rodrigues²² proposes that food involves several aspects, among which emotions and memories. For the author, some dish, its appearance, its aroma and the people involved are all favorable elements to make such moment so special and the experience of conviviality experienced in it.

Effects of Globalization on Food Behavior

In this category the aim is to investigate issues that end up interfering directly on quality and the time of eating. Consumption of processed and semi-prepared foods was observed, which, due to their practicality, end up being widely used due to time, generating a transition of food patterns and influencing the food way of socializing. Over the last few decades, major global changes in food patterns have taken place and are having major social consequences. One of the decisive factors in influencing these eating patterns is undoubtedly industry. The decline of family meals results in corroding the very concept of “meal” in a society where, more and more, at work or in leisure times the preference for “fast food” has become routine. Such transformations have been rather frequently focused, precisely because it is a process that is happening in the present societies.¹

The influence of time on eating behavior was evidenced in the following statements:

It's quite complicated like that. I can't have those meals every three hours. I think my present life won't allow it because I go to college and work, and have a son and husband, everything together. That's why I have a lot of restrictions like that... of having to have time and everything [...]. (13)

Ah... The weather influences. I don't have breakfast, lunch and dinner. And sometimes there is no time for an afternoon snack or in the morning ... Yes, I wish I had more time [...]. (14)

I lack the time to prepare it. The ideal is to prepare it and not to eat the snacks here. (17)

[...] Ah, if I had more time! Specially in the morning, to have some breakfast. Sometimes I'm starving in class. In the afternoon too. I have class at seven. Sometimes I don't have time to do what I want because of time. I would also like to be able to choose, like cooking at home, eating different things, not eating only convenience food [...]. (18)

I can't have my meals quietly because I think the college routine is very hurried [...] I would like to sit down and have a leisurely lunch, some warm, ready-made meal, because from Monday to Friday I don't have lunch as I should have it, which is some adequate food. (19)

It is noted that time influences the interviewees' eating routines. Because of lack of time, many don't eat a few meals during the day. And for those who succeed, it is not always the way they wish it. Another issue is that respondents would like their routines to be different. The main change would be to having more time to prepare and have meals properly. It is known that time influences and contributes to changes in individuals' conviviality at the moment of eating. Bauman,²⁴ in his concept of liquid modernity, brings about the occurrence of changes in the ways of socialization among individuals due to the rapidity of time:

The new instantaneity of time radically changes the modes of human conviviality and more conspicuously the way humans care (or do not care, if it is the case) for their collective affairs. Or rather how they transform (or do not transform, if it is the case) certain issues into collective issues (p. 147).²⁴

A very favorable aspect observed in these reports is that the respondents, although they can not, for the most part, have time to prepare the food or for an adequate eating routine, they still seem to care and be aware of some aspects related to this issue. According to Brasil,²⁰ access to information on healthy eating is crucial so that people can opt for more adequate nutrients but adhering to a healthier lifestyle is not just a matter of choice. Many factors can influence it, time being among them.

Due to the lack of time to prepare meals, many people are now opting for faster eating and this has been reflected in the social changes related to eating behavior, as the following statements show:

[...] At dinner when there are less people at home, we eat pizza, something faster ... a (Japanese food and chemical corporations Nissin Food Products Co., Ltd. and Ajinomoto Co., Inc. instant noodles) miojo®, a hamburger, which is more practical, you know, faster. (14)

[...] I think I would eat better and healthier things if it were at home and not in the street, because you end up wanting to eat a lot. I see some junk food and I'm very hungry and, "Ah! It's just today." And this "only today" takes place every day. (15)

[...] When I don't have convenience [food] or don't have time to make lunch, when I get home very tired during the week, then we eat something frozen, you know. I put it in the microwave oven and it goes faster [...] More for the lack of time [...]. (17)

Sometimes I get home at ten-thirty or eleven o'clock and I have to wake up early the other day. Therefore, making food would be very difficult. It's easier to get a cheeseburger. (18)

I consume a lot. I think... because of time. Not so much because I don't have the time but because of practicality, because I have other things to do. Because I even like to cook. But for convenience and to not waste time... And I like it a lot. I put it in the microwave oven and it's ready. And there are many things that are very good, hamburgers, mini pizzas. (18)

As observed in the speeches, due to the lack of time respondents end up consuming, quite frequently, semi-convenient foods, fast foods, industrialized or from restaurants, because of the speed and convenience with which these foods are ready to be eaten. Such transformations in the way of eating reflect on the sociability of food and people's health. Thus, Nieble¹⁹ believes that food is constantly changing, both in terms of its preparation and the way people eat. However, this does not mean that food has lost its ritualistic character, even with the North American influence of fast food. However, with the discovery that some diseases may be related to certain types of food, people are modifying some eating habits and meanings. Eating rituals have gone through some emptying, especially after the emergence of fast foods. The speed provided by this type of food has facilitated the displacement of meals to other places, such as desks or in front of television sets. This movement may have led to or is leading to decreased awareness of the act of eating.¹⁰

Carneiro⁷ states that fast food eating has been related to most of the current social problems. There is a disruption of food patterns in families. Meals that were previously shared, now occur less frequently, for example. There is a substitution of food made at home by restaurant or snack bar foods. And the big problem is that some snack bars chains have as characteristic a food system based on the substitution of complex carbohydrates by simple carbohydrates, with harmful consequences for consumers' health.

Therefore, although there have been changes in the current way of eating, it is noted that the habit of group meals and the satisfaction involved were still present. Even when the meal is done outside the home, in restaurants or places that serve fast food, there is still the contentment for sharing the moment with another person, because for many the fact of eating alone causes the food to not have the same taste.¹⁹

According to several statements, the use of a microwave oven is quite referred to as some form of practicality. However, Carneiro¹ believes that the use of this appliance can facilitate the act of eating alone, contributing to the end of group meals. These preferences for facility that reduces the food preparation time is a characteristic of the current urban diner.²⁵

Another aspect observed was the relationship between food and other tasks performed throughout the day, as the following reports show:

As I have several activities, for example, it is the PIN which is at the Municipal Health Department, it's here. Therefore, it is there indeed. There isn't anything near to go out and buy something. So there it interferes... Then I have to take something and sometimes there is no time to take it and put it in my bag or go to the market to buy. Therefore, in interferes indeed and a lot. (I2)

The job, no. But its rush, yes. Today everyone, you know... Urbanized life... it is no use. It is the rush. We try to recover lost ground. I know I could have a better planning on my part, but it's easier buying than making, it seems. (I7)

Sometimes I have meetings. For example, today I have a meeting at five o'clock and then I'm going to class. I'm going home only at eleven pm. Therefore, it interferes a lot because I end up eating something there. So it ends up being some snack, something greasier. Then it interferes a lot due to the fact that I'm away from home and don't have much choice. (I8)

From the analysis carried out in the testimonies, it can be noted that the activities that the interviewees perform throughout the day interfere in their eating routines, reflecting in the reduction of the time available to prepare food or even to seek healthier options.

Contemporary commensality is characterized by the lack of time in the preparation and consumption of foods, by the adoption of industrialized products, by the displacement of the meals and by the increase of the individualization of eating rituals. Another issue analyzed by the

author is that contemporary food has become a concern in the health area, since epidemiological studies have shown the link between consumption of industrialized food and some chronic diseases associated with this type of food.²⁵

The excess of industrialized foods incorporated into daily diets can have serious consequences on the health of those who consume them. According to Tardido & Falcão,²⁶ industrialization has brought an increase in the consumption of calories, resulting in greater caloric intake and lower energy expenditure, with consequent accumulation of fat. Another feature cited by the authors that reinforces the adoption of not so healthy eating habits is the replacement of rice, beans and salad by soft drinks, snacks and cookies.

Finally, globalization, industry and food services provide contemporary life with the optimization of time and work, because in the short time people have to eating, haste is the main characteristic seen in urban centers, having as consequence some shortening of the food ritual, both in the preparation and consumption phases, turning eating into only some refueling operation.²⁵

Conclusion

Based on the study, it was possible to notice the social and cultural influences and the senses and meanings that diets have in the interviewees' daily routine, the importance that they have in social coexistence, a fact that was always present, being part of men's development. The eating behavior of different social groups has been changing over time, but despite the changes, it is noted that the social act involved in eating is what remains to this day, albeit modified. This series of changes have happened due to several factors, among them, mainly, time.

Among the limitations of the study, the interviewees' short time available stands out, which prevented many of the people approached to participate in it. This fact is in line with the results obtained in this study, in which it was evidenced that the lack of time is a characteristic of present diners, who have many activities throughout the day and need to reconcile all of them. Finally, new research on this topic is suggested, since it is a very broad field that allows another look at eating, which is not always explored by nutrition. Studies in the field of food and nutrition do not involve unilateral approaches and looks. It is increasingly necessary to incorporate Social Sciences knowledge in this dialogue. The new Brazilian government *Guia Alimentar para a População Brasileira* (Food Guide for the Brazilian Population, recently launched, represents a major step forward in this direction, a movement in nutrition science that seeks to understand the social and cultural aspects contained in the act of eating.

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