

Eating habits and sociability at university students' lunch time

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Abstract

Eating is far beyond satisfying bodily needs. It involves feelings, emotions, memories, desires that influence food choices and the companies to have a meal with, and may also determine a group, a place. This article has aimed to identify university students' eating habits and choices at lunch time and how they behave then. A qualitative methodology was used by means of interviews applied at volunteers' random participation at campus Umuarama at Federal University of Uberlândia. The issues addressed in the study were about the daily number of meals, meals replacement by fast food (snacks), food preferences, and the relationship between food choices and having meals alone or with somebody. We conclude that there is no replacement at lunchtime and that the companies, environment, duration and food choices are factors that affect the respondents' nutritional value of food, indicating the importance of cultural and social eating aspects.

Key words: Lunch. Eating behavior. Sociability.

Introduction

Eating is not restricted to meeting the body's nutritional needs. For Fischler,¹ talking about food is not dealing exclusively with nutrition; food is not only nutrients. The act of eating also means creating practices and assigning meanings to what the people are incorporating to themselves.²

Food can determine a group and a place, serving as a marker of identity linked to meanings. It also involves feelings, emotions, memories and desires that directly influence food choices and companions at meals. Thus, what is eaten, who one eats with and where one eats mark socially established standards. And when changes in eating habits are realized it becomes clear that these patterns have changed and this relates to behavior changes.

Thus, the people with whom one eats can directly interfere in the selection of what to eat and where to eat, because the meal “disintegration” and its connection with the freedom of choice are closely linked to the collective. It means that the responsibility for the option about what will be eaten is of the collective rather than the eater because although individually building their meals, they never do so with complete freedom.³

Therefore, the goal is to identify university students' eating habits and choices at lunch time at Federal University of Uberlândia, campus Umuarama in order to know the food preferences and how they behave towards them, relating this to the fact that they were alone or with a companion.

Observing social aspects involving food choices and relating them to nutritional aspects is the uniqueness of this study. There is little research on college students' food, which either focus a nutritional perspective, or else focus social aspects, merely pointing out changes in eating habits, excluding issues pertaining to the nutrition field. Thereby we intend to contribute to an effective dialogue between the Social Sciences and Nutrition, which has been the central concern of many scholars,^{4,5} reflected in the conferences working groups of the two areas*.

Studies on university students' eating habits

A literature survey of publications on university students' eating habits was held, focused on research that does not restrict its analysis to the field of nutrition, incorporating social aspects of eating.

* *Reunião Brasileira de Antropologia* (RBA – Brazilian Meeting of Anthropology), for example, since 2000, brings together professionals from various fields around the Food Anthropology theme. It is worth noticing that the working group (WG) “Dialogs in the field of Food Anthropology,” during the 29th RBA (2014), has inspired this *Demetra* magazine dossier.

We begin with the article “The deconstruction of eating habits among university students,” where Araújo and Abdala⁶ proposed to study students’ eating habits at the same university where we do our research, the Federal University of Uberlândia (in Portuguese, *Universidade Federal de Uberlândia*, or UFU, a Brazilian public university, located in the southwest of Minas Gerais, in Uberlândia, Brazil), in another campus, Santa Mônica. Seeking to know what the meal had by students at lunchtime is, how and with whom it is had, the objective of the study was to understand whether the respondents follow or revise schedules, content and how to behave during this meal. If lunch (the so-called “real” food, consisting of rice, beans, meat and side dishes) is replaced with a snack was also observed. Another objective was to analyze the meanings of lunchtime for these students as well as to confront their behavior and conceptions about ideal and real lunches.

It is a qualitative research with the use of the semi-structured interview technique and field observation for data collection. Thirty interviews were conducted, preceded by questions regarding the demographic and socioeconomic profiles. During the preliminary observations, the authors noted the movement in some eating establishments chosen due to ease of access and because they are well-attended by students. Among them the University Restaurant (UR), a canteen selling snacks within the university, and two other serving “real food” for lunch and snacks during the day, one inside and the other nearby the campus.

In their field observation, the authors describe that most students having lunch at UFU had companions, but the number of these was not fixed, it would depend on the site where the meal would take place. Regarding costs, the cheapest lunch was in the UR, and spending on snacks matched or exceeded the amount spent on meals. One factor that stood out at lunchtime was the hurry to eat. Another striking finding was the difference for eating and table manners. A fixed and shared structure of behaviors at the table was not observed. It was noted that having a companion is very valued by those who lunch.

In the analysis of the interviews, it was highlighted that the report is unanimous as to time or lack of it for this meal. Respondents demonstrated that they realize how quickly they eat, justifying it by an acquired force of habit, by the limited time available for a large number of activities performed, and also by the need to make room for others to eat. Most have preference for “salty food,” name given by respondents to what the authors call “real food.” The place where they have the meal is chosen by convenience or price when it comes to the UR. Most college students do not have meals at lunchtime without a companion, but sometimes they have different options (some have lunch, while others have snacks) and/or different ways to behave at the table. The authors have also found that there is an effort by the respondents to maintain social ties at the university, related to the notion of an ideal lunch, one had at home with their family.

Araújo and Abdala⁶ conclude, based on Rial,⁷ that changes in contemporary eating habits do not feature a lack of structure, but mean new structures built according to the needs and the context experienced at the moment. They also conclude that the university students interviewed, in general, maintain the custom of having meals at the usual lunchtime, even when they have a short break and even if this means that the meal will be done between 15 and 20 minutes. In time organization, they value being accompanied rather than what they will eat. Therefore, the way of structuring the meals indicates changes, but in terms of representations of the ideal model of meals, home remains the reference as to food, time or the fact of looking for a company. This shows that, slowly, definitions and codes of time, and home and street spaces are being rebuilt and undergoing significant changes where the boundary between these two spaces tends to unravel.

Finally, the authors claim that there is a need for public policy projects proposing to offer better conditions for eating and having a space to remain after meals in order to strengthen and (re)create sociability ties among the university students.

Two other articles about university students' eating habits in approaches that do not focus nutritional aspects are of interest to the objectives of this research. The first one, "Eating behavior in students' halls of residence: a setting for health promotion,"⁸ aimed to qualitatively describe eating practices of students living in a university housing and analyze patterns of individuality/collectivity associated with this practice. For the methodology, the sample was drawn from a group of 253 homes in the students' residence halls that housed 825 undergraduates and graduates in the Brazilian municipality of Campinas, SP, and the participating households were randomly selected. Participant observation techniques and structured interviews were used, and the information collected was about the respondents' eating habits in the last 24 hours (recalling), standard purchase of home food, healthy eating representation, and behaviors related to commensality.

Among the findings in the survey are highlighted those for lunch, which was the meal considered of best quality by the authors: Seventy-two percent had a full course lunch (consisting of foods high in protein, energy booster and regulators, with a mandatory presence of potherbs)**. This is due mainly to the fact that 63% of respondents make this meal at the university cafeteria. As for community and commensality, regarding purchases, 69% showed an individual behavior, 24% mixed, and 7% collective. Forty-three percent reported that having meals together positively changes the eating activity, 37% said that it changes sometimes, and 20% said that eating with a companion does not change it.

** The authors consider a complete lunch based on the criteria used by Gambardella et al.:¹⁵ containing protein-rich foods (builders) such as beans, meat or eggs; energy, consisting of grains and tubers such as rice, pasta in general and potatoes; and vitamins, minerals and fiber (regulators), as in fruits and potherbs.

The authors have shown that eating is a social fact linking the social and the individual, physical and psychic. Therefore, an eating behavior certifies a social contract of identities. For this reason, sharing the food is a rite of social connection that affirms the common identity of a group, hence the importance of choosing with whom to eat.

In the article “College students’ eating habits: a qualitative study,”⁹ the objective was to identify college students’ eating habits and how they deal with possible changes brought by college admission. This qualitative research used a semistructured questionnaire to collect the data, in which the questions were separated into five aspects (breakfast, lunch, dinner, alternative snacks and weekends) and in every aspect there were questions about what they ate, when, where, with whom, and how long it would take to have each meal. Twenty interviews were held (12 women and 8 men) with students aged 18-38 years, from the Federal University of Mato Grosso do Sul (in Portuguese, *Universidade Federal de Mato Grosso do Sul*, or UFMS, a public university located in the state of Mato Grosso do Sul in Brazil), at campus Campo Grande. The results found in terms of lunch were: lack of time; held together when at home and alone when elsewhere; the perception that eating out is seen as incompilant preestablished standards, namely unhealthy versus healthy eating (when at home); in relation to the foods consumed are most often cited rice, beans, salad, eggs, noodles, cassava, beef, poultry and fish; vegetables and potherbs are less often cited; and in choosing what to drink, they are more adept at fresh fruit juices, with less preference for soda and, depending on financial resources, they prefer water. It follows then that among these students time availability, financial resources, place, variety of food and product quality are critical factors in food choices. Eating out is synonymous with unhealthy eating. When lunch is replaced with sandwiches or snacks, this is not considered a meal, it is only an immediate action to alleviate hunger.

Apart from the above discussed studies, other research analyzes eating habits with people from the Federal University of Uberlândia, although not restricted to the students: Castro and Abdala,¹⁰ in “TV at mealtime,” deal with the social importance of meals, placing them as providing sociability and ritualization, and observe the changes relating to eating habits in the contemporary world, as more and more television is present at that moment.

The objectives of the research were to observe if television plays a significant role in family social relations at mealtimes, to see if its use takes place and is seen differently according to a family socioeconomic profile and different age groups, as well as examine whether this moment is still for meals as sociability, ritualization and structuring.

A qualitative methodology was employed, using a questionnaire and a semi-structured interview. The study site was the campus Santa Mônica at Federal University of Uberlândia (UFU) and the sample was made up of students, teachers, employees, contractors service provides, employees from commercial establishments and service agencies.

In the results and discussion they report that 38 people were interviewed, including 16 students, six employees, six teachers from UFU and 10 service providers (comprising employees of outsourced companies and agencies that provide services, and also traders) – 14 men and 24 women, of which 65% were single. They found that 47% lived in households with nuclear families; the rest were people who lived just with their children, and to a lesser extent those who lived with family members and also with unrelated people.

Regarding the meal considered as the main one, 65% of respondents would have lunch in the middle of the day, which was not related to sociability, but to a food and nutrition issue – mentioned by 63% of the interviews. A second factor, mentioned by 17% of people, was linked to time or lack of it and the desire of tranquility. And the third factor, mentioned by 17% of people, was being with family.

As for dinner, it was noted that this does not have much importance for respondents, and its occurrence is variable. Sometimes it is not had, sometimes they eat something before going to bed, but they do not necessarily “dine.” Or else they say dinner is “fattening” or is heavy for those who have extended their activities until later. Concern about heavy foods at dinner and getting fat was mainly reported among women (37%); 39% of respondents often have dinner alone; 23.6% do so sometimes alone or with others; and 36% in most cases accompanied by family members.

Considering meal and television, of all respondents (38), only 37% do not have the habit of dining in front of the TV; 5% reported not watching TV, understanding it as something that disrupts the meal of all; 8% reported the meal as a silent moment; and among those who watch TV, 53% talk while eating and deal with different issues from the ones aired on television.

The authors concluded that in the respondents’ group the sense of main meal is linked to health and energy, more than socialization. Therefore dinner is not very present in the reports as the main meal. There are new ways of food structuration, ritualization and significance adapting to needs. Dinner can be a meal that has a socializer and ritualization function, but people construct moments that are equivalent to dinner in other everyday situations. And TV itself does not preclude socialization and ritualization in meals, but the use made of it. The meals structure and the time spent with them change, signaling changes, but there is still a perception of an ideal food as the one made at home, either for the food itself, the time or the companions.

A study by Castro and Abdala¹⁰ has relevance for this research as it relates to the eating habits of people from the university, including students. Although dinner and TV have not been directly explored in this study, the dinner approach refers to indirectly mentioning lunch, its importance from the nutritional point of view and also for sociability.

Research by Alves and Boog⁸ was held in student housing, which differs from this proposal, which is a meal had in and around campus Umuarama at UFU. However, it is relevant by making clear the importance of eating accompanied as influencing food choice.

In the work by Borges and Filho,⁹ the aspect of the change of habits due to entering university, bringing together several factors that influence the students' food choices, becomes relevant to our proposal.

Research by Araújo and Abdala⁶ is important to seek to know what meal is eaten at lunchtime, how and with whom it is had, which for our proposal is relevant to guide us in aspects that, like them, we want to observe.

Methods

A qualitative methodology was used because we think this allows a deeper understanding of the object and to better reach the group's peculiarities, as well as grasp the processes of change underway, using observation and collection of testimonials¹¹. Thus, the number of interviews was not a determining factor for the option adopted in this research.

The students at campus Umuarama at UFU were invited to participate as volunteers during an exploratory field study carried out in order to observe what the venues most frequented by them were in and around the campus, as well as their eating choices and behaviors at lunchtime, especially if they were accompanied or not.

The college students were randomly approached by the interviewer at lunchtime at the entrance or exit of establishments where meals were held. When the invitation was accepted, the research objectives were clarified and the participants signed an Informed Consent Form (ICF). The interviews were recorded. Once completed, they were transcribed and analyzed.

Three establishments were observed within the university: a snack bar, a restaurant/cafeteria and the University Restaurant. On the surroundings, six restaurants and a street food vending cart.

To prepare the interview script, the Practices and Eating Behavior Diagnostic Instrument¹² was taken as the basis, in which a smattering of responses are provided. They were not read to the respondent, but only served to direct the interviewer when they realized that the respondents did not respond or understand the question.

The script applied included questions about how many meals they had daily; what kind of foods were chosen for these meals; at what time of the day lunch was held; how long would lunch last, whether the respondent felt that it was enough time and why; in which place they used to have lunch and why they would chose a certain spot; if at lunchtime they would usually be accompanied, with whom, by how many people and what reason had led them to have lunch in groups and if not, why they lunched alone; if usually they ate lunch standing (or walking) or sitting (at a table and chair or another place – which); the description of the composition of the lunch dish; if the participant had dinner and the description of what they ate at that time.

The application of the interview was preceded by demographic and socioeconomic issues encompassing gender, age, place of birth, nationality; residence time in Uberlândia; description of skin color or race; marital status; with whom they lived (or shared residence) and how many people; if they had their own income; if not, what the family income was; which course they were taking, which semester or year and which shift.

Results and discussion

Twenty interviews were applied, 65% with female students and 35% with males. Students were studying Agricultural engineering (3), Veterinary Medicine (2), Nursing (2), Psychology (5), Zootechnics (1), Nutrition (2), Environmental Engineering (1), Medicine (2), Dentistry (2), all offered full-time. All participants are Brazilian and the age range stated was 18-27 years. Only one student did not report their age. As for marital status, all declared themselves unmarried, although one respondent stated to be “living with a partner and son”; 70% of respondents live with their family (parents and siblings) and the other 30% either shared residence with other students or lived with relatives/friends or by themselves.

The main dietary guidelines for the Brazilian population stand out: a) the importance of fresh or minimally processed foods, such as potherbs, fruits, meat, rice, beans and milk representing the staple diet – about 85% of all food daily; b) the concentration of 90% of daily calories to be consumed in the three main meals – breakfast, lunch and dinner; c) the presence of potherbs (vegetables and leaves) at lunch and dinner, alternating the form of preparation – raw, cooked, braised; d) the reduced consumption of processed and ultra-processed food products; e) having

meals together with others, in quiet surroundings, sitting at a table so they could pay attention to what they were eating.¹³

When questioned about how many meals they had daily, mixed results were obtained. Among respondents, 25% say they have four meals; 20%, three meals; and 15% three or four meals a day. Ten percent of the students have one and 5% have six daily meals.

Regarding which meals, we realize that all have lunch and 60% have dinner. Among the other meals reported appear breakfast, had by 60% of respondents; morning snack by 15%; afternoon snack by 80%; evening snack replacing dinner by 30%; and evening snack, corresponding to supper, by 10%.

We realized that among the respondents who reported having only one meal, this was lunch. However, when they answered about dinner at the end of the interview, they said they would have a snack. Therefore, it is clear that they consider it a meal only when rice and beans are present, Brazilian staple food. Borges and Filho⁸ claim that when lunch is replaced with a sandwich or a snack, this is not considered a meal, just an immediate action to alleviate hunger. Consequently they show that it is common among university students to consider a meal just those occasions when consuming the main dish or “salty food.”

The content chosen for meals varies greatly according to the will, the preference and what each have available to eat and buy in each of them. At breakfast, 45% opt for foods like cheese roll, bread, black coffee and milk, with the exception of one respondent, who claims to eat the leftovers from dinner the day before. Morning snack was mentioned by only one respondent who usually consumes crackers or fruit at this time. At lunch, rice, beans, meat and salad stood out in 80% of responses. Only one person said they ate snacks or a sandwich at this time, and two others would replace lunch with snacks only when there was no time whatsoever. As an afternoon snack, 75% said they would eat bread and butter, ham and cheese or just cheese, followed by black coffee, snacks and fruit. As for dinner, rice, beans, meat and salad were mentioned by 40%, but replacements with sandwiches and snacks were also common for 60% of respondents. In such cases, the evening snack would be with bread, milk, fruit juice and instant noodles. Finally, when asked what the meals during the day were, the evening snack/supper was mentioned but no food consumed at that time was reported.

The answers would not always specify the food choices at meals; some were vague, such as the following:

Wow, tough question... I search healthier foods, but it is not always possible, especially here in college, where availability is not conducive (Respondent no. 11).

Galante, Galisa & Ribeiro¹⁴ claim that a balanced diet “[...] is not only about the consumption of foods that contain the nutrients necessary for the individual but also the fact that this combination be enjoyable and appropriate to a lifestyle.” The qualitative method to plan and analyze a menu and for this to be balanced is to see if it contains at least one food from each group (considering that these groups are builders, regulators and energy boosters) in all meals had.^{14,15}

When we analyze the foods cited as chosen by respondents for their meals, taking into account the criteria described above, it is clear that these students’ food choices throughout the day, in general, do not always include all the food groups. However, when analyzing only lunch, as most respondents reported consuming rice, beans, meat and salad, a qualitative analysis would not indicate loss in nutritional value because at this meal they can include the three groups.

The time at which students eat lunch varies according to the time available to have the meals, such as the time between the end of classes in the morning and the start of class in the afternoon. Thus, there were students who reported to have lunch at 10:30 (at this time the University Restaurant is already serving lunch; the other restaurants often start their services at around 11 am) up to 2 pm. But 30% organize lunch at 12 o’clock.

The same variables mentioned above influence lunch time duration from 10 to 50 minutes, with 35% reporting it as lasting 20 minutes. The time reported is considered to be deficient in 75% of the interviews. Those who stay longer claim that it is suitable to eat and even talk to friends, or also to eat slowly, chew well and be satisfied. Among those who think the amount of time is enough are also those who claim to eat little or quickly. But those who feel that the time is short contrast with the occasions when they can have more time to eat, or complain of having so much to do that they end up reducing the lunch period and eating fast to accomplish other activities, or simply claim that time is short and they have to eat fast.

The places where they would have lunch were inside the campus and surrounding areas, and the University Restaurant (UR) was the most cited (70%). Others lunch sites mentioned were the cafeterias on campus, surrounding restaurants and at home when possible. The rationale for the choice of location was very wide, from the fact that they held scholarships for the UR, price, a balanced diet, time availability, location, proximity, up to a variety of preparations offered.

Most respondents (55%) reported being accompanied at lunchtime and only 10% said they were not; 20% said they were often accompanied, and 15% said they would be rather alone than accompanied. As to who these companies were, the most cited responses were classmates and college friends from the same courses. Regarding the number of people who make up these groups for lunch, varied responses were received, but none stood out with the highest number of repetitions, ranging from two to 10 people.

Among the 15 students who would have lunch accompanied or most of the time accompanied, only three would choose to eat snacks. All others would eat preparations such as rice, beans, meat and salad for lunch. Among the five who claimed to eat alone or more often alone than accompanied, two would choose to eat rice, beans, meat and salad, in general, and the others would opt for snacks for lunch. Therefore, it is possible to realize that when they are accompanied they seek a so-called full course meal, not replacing it with a snack or sandwich. And when they are alone, they end up choosing the fastest option and many times they justify this by the lack of time due to having school projects, tests and even class in a short time interval.

The motives for these students to have meals in groups vary, ranging from not enjoying feeling alone, due to considering this a relaxation time, or to continue discussions on school projects, or the proximity because they are in the same school class and studying the same disciplines in the morning and afternoon. In a few speeches these reasons are clear:

Hmm... I don't know... So that I don't feel lonely... I don't know. (Respondent no. 12).

Ah! I don't like to have lunch alone... I think it is too sad! (Respondent no. 14).

Or else:

When you talk, you interact. It is a... a leisure time. Because you catch up, you talk, distract the mind indeed and eat, right? (Respondent no. 15).

As for the motivations for having lunch alone, they also varied, such as not meeting anyone after school; the UR queue grows too large and it is not possible to wait for friends; some days they do not have classes with the course friends or the schedules do not match; or they simply lack companions. Some of these reasons are evident in the speeches:

Sometimes because I have to do something and they do not. Or else they have to do something or we miss each other and then I go and have lunch alone. (Respondent no. 5).

I don't know, haste... I think it is more practical... hmm... when you don't have to... Like that I don't wait for anyone, I go and have lunch by myself. (Respondent no. 7).

All respondents reported having lunch sitting on a chair at a table, a fact also noted by Abdala¹⁶ “[...] they eat preferably at the table rather than standing as Americans.” The exception was one participant who reported having lunch sitting and that when she eats snacks this situation changes:

At a table, chair, sometimes there is no table, but, you know, when it is at a restaurant there are a table and a chair. When it is a snack, you know, I grab and go on walking. It is with a lot of people around, talking, shouting, speaking... And you speak, talk and do not swallow right, that way you chew carelessly. (Respondent no. 3).

Ah, gee! Here at UFU at a table, right, it is normal. But at home it is always on the couch. (Respondent no. 9).

The dish composition for 70% is rice, beans, meat and salad. Some described the vegetables they would eat or prefer and if they would have a dessert. Those who would opt for snacks and soda (30%) reported what they would typically consume at lunch and if there were differences with regard to what they consumed on the interview day.

It is usually rice, beans, some type of meat, always. It is very unusual to not have salad, right? Leafy vegetables and some potherbs. Today, due to the lack of time and a lot to study for the test that I have in one or two days, I had two snacks and a zero-calorie diet soda. (Respondent no. 11).

Well. I am always like that... I don't eat much rice, carbohydrates are not much my preference. I've been recently learning to eat brown rice. Then I eat a little bit more, one more table spoon of it, the large one, it is the one I use. Beans I always have too. There is always some salad, you know. And there is also come meat, right, or else it is no good... (laughs) It is sad. I've just had a chicken croissant, haven't drunk. And also ketchup and mayonnaise to overdo it. (Respondent no. 10).

Lunch composition described by the respondents was also observed by Abdala¹⁶ in his research with families who have the habit of having lunch outside the home every day: “[...] the adoption of weighing in restaurants and its wide acceptance seem to configure a local *culinary culture*, expressing a set of preferences that manifest national cultural peculiarities, [...] by the traditional choice of rice, beans, meat and salad instead of a sandwich...” The same composition is pointed out by the *Guia Alimentar Para a População Brasileira* (Brazilian Population Food Guide).¹³ preparations with rice and beans are present in most lunches, which shows the Brazilians’ eating “reality.”

Among respondents, 45% said they were used to eating salty food for dinner and 30% stated they replace this meal with snacks. When the latter were asked about what they would eat at that time, the answers were quite homogeneous. Most stated that they would eat a sandwich such as bread with something (pâté, ham and mozzarella) and sandwiches generally or instant noodles, usually accompanied by fruit juice or milk. Those who would not have a snack reported eating rice, beans, meat and salad.

It is... meal staples indeed such as rice, beans, salad, no meat. At dinner time I always have a more enhanced snack, usually a healthy sandwich or else pizza, I don't know... Some kind of snack. (Respondent no. 11).

We realized, though, that some mention dinner and when they describe what they consume, they talk about snacks. Therefore, there may be an interpretation that dinner is in the evening and at that time anything that is consumed is dinner. Or it may merely be understood as the so-called full course meal. Or else there is the possibility of skipping this meal and calling it night snack, which would be the only moment of a night meal.

As for Araújo & Abdala⁶ in their work on the Federal University of Uberlândia, campus Santa Monica students' eating habits, they said that most of the respondents had a preference for "salty food." In the reports we collected, we note that the majority also chooses rice, beans, meat and salad. Thus, there is no indication of replacement of said full course meal with a snack at lunchtime. However, this substitution is clearly noticed at dinner time, as already observed in a study by Castro & Abdala.⁹

When analyzing the choices throughout the day, it is clear that there may be a deficit of food groups, such as potherbs, which when mentioned in salad preparations only one or two are of preference. In this aspect, according to recommendations from the *Guia Alimentar Para a População Brasileira*,¹³ potherbs are good sources of fiber, vitamins, minerals and bioactive compounds that contribute to the prevention of diseases. Adding to the diet fresh or minimally processed food products and varied, mainly of vegetable origin, is recommended, which form the basis of a balanced diet from the nutritional point of view, with a pleasing taste, culturally appropriate and promoting an environmentally and socially sustainable production.

The time taken to have lunch, the place where it takes place, and having companions may also interfere with the nutritional value of the meal. Preparations consumed carefully and unhurriedly benefit the digestion of food and avoid eating more than necessary. Therefore, eating regularly, slowly and carefully leads to a natural control of the amount eaten. The characteristics of the environment where we have our meals, such as smell, sound, lighting, comfort, cleanliness, among others, influence the amount we eat. And meals had with companions avoid that one eats fast, favoring more suitable environments due to demanding tables and appropriate utensils.¹³

We agree with these observations, since most of the respondents, even when reporting that the time to have breakfast was sufficient, commented that they would eat fast, and when accompanied by someone they would eat more slowly, since during the meal they take the opportunity to talk, either catching up daily experiences, or talking about matters related to college. In one of the aforementioned reports, the interference of environmental features is explicit, as students reported

consuming snacks when time was scarce or inadequate, and doing it while walking and talking, or else sitting at the cafeteria with a lot of noise and bustle, and not eating right. In contrast, meals at home would be held in a calm and familiar environment.

Final thoughts

In this study, we have analyzed the act of eating, proposing a dialog between Social Sciences and Nutrition, considering that eating involves cultural and social meanings that go beyond the physiological need. From this perspective, some aspects are highlighted in university students' reports when interviewed, such as meal companions, duration of the meal, the environment and choices of food.

Most respondents prefer to be accompanied during lunch. Sociability then is related to distraction, chat with friends and matters concerning the university. When there's company, the choices are about healthier options, as there is influence in deciding where and what to eat. Thus, when accompanied, people prefer "salty foods" – most indicated a choice of rice, beans, meat and salad. Only 10% said they replace lunch with a quick snack due to haste or lack of company. However, replacement is common for dinner.

Companions also influence the duration of the meal, usually 20 minutes, reaching 50 minutes. However, it is not the only variable that affects this factor as some people pointed out that there is little time available due to the large number of activities and limited hours for lunch.

Environment is an important aspect. In this study, its influence was cited, especially by people who resort to quick snacks and criticize the eating places that are offered at the campus and its surroundings. These were evaluated as being often noisy, bustling and with limited availability of seats, contributing to increased speed of stay and food consumption. In this respect, we agree with the ones interviewed by Araújo and Abdala,⁶ who pointed to the need for an expansion of conviviality spaces at university campuses so that students can strengthen their moments of sociability during and after meals and activities.

Another relevant factor is with regard to the choices of food. We noted little variation in the group of potherbs when comparing to the daily intake recommended of a wide variety of fresh vegetables, both for reasons related to nutritional benefits, as for cultural, environmental and social reasons.¹³

We understand, therefore, that it is about promoting policies and spaces within the university that include ample opportunities for information and dissemination of recommendations for healthy eating, considering it as a set of factors that is not restricted to a nutritional issue, but to the environment and sociability that the act of eating provides.

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