



Spatial, temporal, and health associations of eating alone: A cross-cultural analysis of young adults in urban Australia and Japan



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ABSTRACT

Eating alone is driven by social and cultural factors, not solely by individual preferences. In academic research, eating alone is often simply treated as an alternative to social, commensal eating, and little is known about the practice of eating alone itself. This study employs a cross-cultural analysis to explore social and cultural associations of eating alone. The analysis is based on 1) cultural domain data, derived from principal component analysis of *freelist* responses, a set of words or phrases related to the topic of eating alone; and 2) in-depth interviews with 72 young adults aged 20–40 in urban Australia and Japan. Many Australian and Japanese young adult participants associated eating alone with both pleasure and stress of being isolated from others. However, the comparison of principal components between Australian and Japanese groups and gender subgroups showed cross-cultural variations and complexity in the context of eating alone including: locations and timings of eating alone, and associations with healthy/unhealthy eating. Analyses of interviews are included to deepen understandings of cultural domains. These key associations are influenced by a range of social and cultural environments such as fast food cultures, work and life environments, and the scope of public health nutrition programs. The association between eating alone and healthy eating among young adults indicates that individualistic understandings of food intake in current public health nutrition programs are more favorable to eating alone and foster a gap between ideas of healthy eating and commensal eating as a cultural ideal.

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1. Introduction

Recent food-related studies have confirmed that food practices are not only driven by individual preferences, but also by social and cultural factors (Fischler, 2011; Poulain, 2002; Sobal & Nelson, 2003). However, many discussions about socio-cultural representations of food practices have focused on impacts or values of human sociality and commensality, or eating together at the same table. The practice of eating alone has often been treated as the less-desirable alternative to commensality, and there are few studies examining the complexity and social and cultural determinants of eating alone.

Several global trends favor eating alone compared to commensal eating. Firstly, in many societies, increasing numbers of people live alone or with a smaller number of household members

(Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2016), who are the most common companions for commensal eating (Sobal & Nelson, 2003). Secondly, the development of flexible work schedules makes synchronization of mealtimes with others more difficult (Dixon et al., 2014). Along with these societal changes, more meals are consumed in a rush (Holm et al., 2016; Yates & Warde, 2017). More meals and snacks are consumed outside of the household and eating out has become a common practice (Paddock, Warde, & Whillans, 2017). Although quantification of the increase in eating alone is difficult due to lack of historical data across societies, some countries' reports have shown that more people are eating alone over recent years (Mestdag & Glorieux, 2009; Venn, Banwell, & Dixon, 2016). Eating alone is most common in the morning followed by midday, while dinner tends to be eaten with company (Mestdag & Glorieux, 2009; Yates & Warde, 2017).

In public health, the practice of eating alone is considered a problem for particular age and gender groups. For adolescents, less frequent commensality with family or eating alone, which is the most common alternative to family commensality for teenagers,

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was associated with low fruit and vegetable intake and high soft drink consumption (Neumark-Sztainer, Hannan, Story, Croll, & Perry, 2003) as well as an increased likelihood of skipping breakfast (Videon & Manning, 2003). These studies suggest relaxation or absence of social control by parents and other family members when meals are eaten alone. For the older population, eating alone appears to derive from living alone, and particularly from the absence of female family members. Studies focusing on older men living alone report that single men tend to eat less vegetables and fruit (Donkin et al., 1998; Hughes, Bennett, & Hetherington, 2004). However, recent studies conducted in East Asia reported that eating alone was identified even among elderly living with others and showed associations with decreased variation in food intake (Kimura et al., 2012) and depressive symptoms (Kuroda et al., 2015; Wang et al., 2016). Whether living alone or living with others, eating alone for the older population could contribute to the experience of loneliness, subjective perceptions of social isolation, as well as concerns about aging (Bofill, 2004). Although many studies reported negative impacts of eating alone, some impacts are specific to the lifestyles of young children and the elderly and we cannot assume that this evidence is applicable to all age groups.

Many descriptions about eating alone are one-sided and heavily influenced by concerns about the decline of family commensality rather than by strong evidence that family commensality is in decline (Murcott, 1997, 2012) or that family commensality always results in positive health and social outcomes. In fact, it was shown that fast-food purchases for family commensality were associated with intake of fast food for both parents and children (Boutelle, Fulkerson, Neumark-Sztainer, Story, & French, 2007). Despite the potentially complex nature of the practice, positive aspects of family commensality have been uncritically presented and dominate even in academic research (Wilk, 2010). These uncritical views on family commensality parallel the lack of in-depth attention to the practice of eating alone.

Recently, several qualitative studies shed light on both positive and negative aspects of commensality and eating alone. Danesi (2011, 2012) examined experiences of commensality and eating alone among young adults in France and Germany, and showed that the experience of these two eating practices are interrelated: negative experiences of commensality are constructed through the stress of eating together driven by social hierarchy and collective norms which may conflict with preferences of individuals. Giacomani (2016) examined roles of commensality among Chilean adults from different socio-economic backgrounds, and showed that regardless of the backgrounds of people, commensality remains important to strengthen cohesion among groups such as family, friends, and work colleagues. She also emphasized that commensality is not always a convivial and pleasant experience particularly in meals of groups with difficult power dynamics and hierarchies such as families and workplaces. Yet, in these studies, most of the analyses were centered on roles of commensality, and eating alone is presented as a counterpart of commensality.

This study draws on cross-cultural analyses derived from *freelisting* and in-depth interviews about eating alone among young adults in urban Australia and Japan, and examines social and cultural associations with the practice of eating alone. One of the methodological strengths of cross-cultural studies is that they maximize variation in observations compared to studies of a single society, and thus improve the inter-cultural validity of theories (Ember, 2009). Generally, variation between different cultures of a single country or region is larger than variation between individuals in the same culture (Rozin, 2003). To ensure independence of cases in studies of two cultures, comparison of cultures which have had fewer historical cultural interactions is recommended to maximize variation (Ross, 2011). At the same time, the

selection of cases which have common baselines is also recommended to ensure comparability of diverse data (Berry, 1978), otherwise the study may compare different variables. Most of the previous studies about commensality and eating alone have been conducted in Europe and North America, which tend to be geographically- and culturally-similar and share similar culinary traditions.

This study examines ideas of eating alone between young adult groups from two developed countries in the Asia-Pacific region with different culinary traditions and food environments: Australia and Japan. Although the two countries share a similar geographic region and feature in that most of their land is not connected to other nation-states, foundations of their culinary culture and practices vary. Contemporary Australia is a multi-cultural society which accommodates and modifies diverse culinary cultures, while its culinary foundations and practices are built on British, English, Scottish, Irish and Welsh heritage (Santich, 2012). The range of culinary practices and cultures in contemporary Japan was built on a combination of diverse regional cultures and continuous influence from overseas (Kumakura, 2007). For the comparison of cities, Canberra and Sydney were selected as cities which share similar characteristics with Tokyo and its neighboring prefectures, as the capital and business center of the country. We focus on young adults for two reasons. Firstly, as discussed earlier, studies of eating alone have often focused on the elderly and young children who are more likely to be vulnerable to the negative impacts of eating alone (i.e. social isolation) and their choices of eating with others or alone are often determined by those who take care of them (i.e. parents). In contrast, young adults have more freedom to choose whether they eat alone or not, in response to social and cultural circumstances. Secondly, lives and perceptions of young adults in many societies are more affected by globalization than older generations through employment, technology, and their social relations (Bourn, 2008).

2. Methods

2.1. Data collection

In-depth interviews of Australian and Japanese men and women between 20 and 40 years old were conducted in Tokyo and its neighboring prefectures (i.e. Saitama, Chiba and Kanagawa), and in Sydney and Canberra between 2012 and 2013. The participants were recruited through diverse methods: online advertisements (Gum tree in Australia and Facebook in Japan), universities, community centers, and introductions from participants and colleagues. Quota sampling was employed to balance numbers of gender and age groups in Australia and Japan. Participants from diverse occupations, employment, education attainment, marital status and living arrangements agreed to participate in the study. The entire interview consisted of *freelist* questions about eating alone as well as eating together (eating with others, eating with family, eating with friends, and eating with work colleagues) followed by questions about each participant's eating habits and lifestyle (i.e., living arrangements, time schedules, and working styles).

Cultural domain analysis (CDA) originates from an idea in cognitive anthropology that culture is shared knowledge and domains, and examines to what extent the knowledge are shared among cultural groups (Romney, Weller, & Batchelder, 1986; Weller, 2007). *Freelisting* is one of major ethnographic techniques of CDA which explores the *emic* (insider's) view of "cultural domains", a set of words and phrases about a certain topic shared among groups of people (Quinlan, 2005). Although CDA appears to be similar to open-ended surveying, it is different in that the former

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