



Eating at the table, on the couch and in bed: An exploration of different locus of commensality in the discourses of Brazilian working mothers



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ABSTRACT

Background: Commensality is a remarkable human act, and tends to be more present among families. Nevertheless, it is possible that eating at the table is being taken for granted when one refers to family meals. Thus, this paper aims to analyze working mothers' discourses about family meals eaten at the table, on the couch and in the bed/bedroom.

Methods: The participants were thirty mothers working in public universities of the Brazilian region called Baixada Santista. A qualitative study was conducted, using semi-structured interviews. In the transcripts the words "table", "couch", "bed", "bedroom" were located and the excerpts containing them were extracted and analyzed according to a classical and exploratory content analysis.

Results: The table is a significant component of meals that unite the family. While for some the meal at the table is an enjoyable moment, it is a stiff moment for others. Indeed, manners and the notion of hierarchy appeared only for the table. Regarding the couch, it seems that the family chose to eat there, because it is a more casual and relaxed setting. Eating in the bed was related to precarity, intimacy and casualness. In the three settings, watching television was a common practice, replacing or being added to talking.

Conclusions: Commensality is such an important practice that appears in different settings and even in precarity contexts. The table emerged as the maximal cornerstone of commensality. However, when it was not present, new arrangements were made. Especially the couch seems to be a new commensal space, less formal and rigid, but able to allow some collective conviviality. Eating in the bed was a less common practice. Finally, the significant role that television assumed in meals is highlighted.

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1. Introduction

Sharing food is one of the most remarkable acts of human interactions. This act produces social ties and bonding, helps to establish collective identities and transmits ideals and norms (Fischler, 2011; Sobal, 2000; Sobal & Nelson, 2003). In its literal sense, "commensality" means "eating in the same table" (Fischler, 2011). In a broader meaning, commensality can be defined as

"eating food together" or, in other words, "with other people" (Sobal, 2000; Sobal & Nelson, 2003). Oliveira and Casqueiro (2008) also conceptualized it as the ritual constructed around food sharing, which involves pleasure, sociability and communication.

Commensality has been structurally conceptualized as commensal units and circles. Commensal units are the groups of people who meet at a given moment and place in order to eat food together. Since eating with the family seems to be more frequent than eating with any other people, the family tends to be the major commensal unit. Inclusion and exclusion of various commensal units forms commensal circles, which are "networks of relationships that delineate the range of people whom individuals could, have, and do eat with" (Sobal & Nelson, 2003). Most commensal

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circles are composed also by family members (Sobal & Nelson, 2003; Sobal & Hanson, 2014).

Indeed, family meals have been arousing great interest in the scientific literature. Although they may be defined in several different ways, the current concept of a family meal utilized by researchers is generally defined as “those occasions when food is eaten simultaneously in the same location by more than one family member” (Martin-Biggers et al. 2014). Associations between family meal frequency and dietary intake, disordered eating, psychological well-being and body weight are being studied (Fruh, Fulkerson, Mulekar, Kendrick, & Clanton, 2011; Martin-Biggers et al. 2014; Woodruff & Hanning, 2009). Investigating associations between body weight and family meal frequency, Sobal and Hanson (2014) divided family dinners into: food cooked and eaten at home; takeout food eaten at home; food eaten at the homes of relatives or friends; food eaten at a restaurant and food eaten at a fast-food place. These authors affirmed that even with these divisions, it was not possible to access details on the socialization of meals, such as in which room the family ate, sited at a table or not and doing other activities (like watching television) or not. Some studies show that children and adolescents who watch television during meals eat a less healthy diet (Dubois, Farmer, Girard, & Peterson, 2008; Feldman, Eisenberg, Neumark-Sztainer, & Story, 2007). Therefore, many questions in this matter remain underexplored. Visser (2008), analyzing thoroughly the origins and characteristics of table manners, stated that “the idea, which we take for granted, that everyone usually sits around a table to eat is very specific to our own culture”.

Since the space delimited by the table is a social space (Fischler, 2011), it would be interesting to study family meals that occur at this space and at others. Until the limit of our knowledge, no study explored reports and perceptions about eating in different settings, such as the table, the couch and the bed. The importance of this kind of investigation is noteworthy, once that even some dietary guidelines (such as the Brazilian ones, reported by Monteiro et al., 2015) recommends eating with regularity and attention, in company and in appropriate settings. Thus, this paper aims to explore and compare Brazilian working mothers' discourses about family meals eaten at the table, on the couch and in bed/bedroom, with emphasis on family reunion, talking and watching television during meals.

2. Materials and methods

2.1. Study design and sampling

This study is part of a research titled “In their own voices: eating practices of working mothers residents of the Baixada Santista¹”. The primary study aimed to analyze and interpret how working mothers resident in the Baixada Santista perceived, described and narrated their eating practices, placing them in a historical process from their childhood to the present. The “Baixada Santista” is a Brazilian southeast seacoast region, comprising nine very urbanized cities and 1.7 million inhabitants.

The methodological framework of the abovementioned study was oral history (Meihy, 2005; Thompson, 2002). The main outcome of the research was the individual narrative of the life story of each participant. Nonetheless, these narratives had as the main focus the construction of each participant eating practices. The decision of studying mothers was based on the strong socio-cultural role that they have regarding family meals (Sato et al.

2014). The Federal University of São Paulo Ethics Committee approved this study and all participants signed a written and informed consent before their participation.

A qualitative research was performed, in which thirty mothers working in the two public universities of the region (UNIFESP and UNESP) participated. The inclusion criteria were: 1) being a mother; 2) working in one of the two public universities of the region (but not as a professor); 3) not being elder than 65 years old and 4) living in one of the cities of the Baixada Santista. An enrollment was conducted to identify subjects within these criteria and to obtain their respective educational degree. Further, a stratified randomized sampling was conducted, having the educational degree of study as a criterion (until: elementary school completed/high school completed/college completed). A lottery randomly selected thirty women in each educational degree category. Those were contacted and invited to participate in the study. The first ten women who accepted to participate composed the sample of each category. The sample was composed by thirty women (with a response rate of 93.3%), from whom twelve worked in administrative positions, ten were cleaning personnel, five were security guards and three were kitchen maids. Twenty women were born in Southeast Brazil, eight in the Northeast and two in the South. Twelve women contributed the most for the family income, while for seven the husband did so. Eight shared this provision equally with the husband, while three indicated another parent as the main income provider. Regarding the educational level of their fathers, fifteen had until elementary school completed, two had completed high school, one had college degree and twelve did not know this information.

This sample size is similar or superior to previous qualitative studies regarding eating practices of Brazilian women, such as Baião and Deslandes (2010) (n = 26 subjects); Ferreira and Magalhães (2011) (n = 12 subjects) and Rotenberg and De Vargas (2004) (n = 13 subjects).

2.2. Data collection

Semi-structured interviews were performed together by a dietitian and an anthropologist, and each one produced a field diary. A significant bond was created between the interviewers and the participants, who many times acknowledged the researchers for listening to their stories. This bond was also seen when the interviewers revisited the participants to return the transcript conversations, action that generally caused a strong emotional reaction.

The interviews had a guide with open questions, which was pretested. Participants were asked to reflect about their old and current eating practices and, at the same time, about their life courses, styles and changes. The interviewers deeply investigated participants' historical perceptions, cultural and familiar influences, commensal practices, symbols, values and behaviors regarding eating. These topics were selected because they encompass the definition of eating practices proposed by Poulain and Proença (2003), which composed part of the theoretical framework for the primary study that provided the data analyzed here.

The interviews were audio taped and subsequently fully transcribed. The notes taken by the interviewers on the subject's actions (such as crying or laughing) were incorporated in the transcription.

2.3. Data analysis

Given the objective of this paper, the words “table”, “couch”, “bed”, “bedroom”¹ were located all over the transcripts. Excerpts that had these words but with an incongruous context to our aims

¹ In the transcripts of the interviews no other settings for eating, beside table, couch and bed/bedroom, emerged.

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