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Changes in the social context and conduct of eating in four Nordic countries between 1997 and 2012

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ABSTRACT

How have eating patterns changed in modern life? In public and academic debate concern has been expressed that the social function of eating may be challenged by de-structuration and the dissolution of traditions.

We analyzed changes in the social context and conduct of eating in four Nordic countries over the period 1997—2012. We focused on three interlinked processes often claimed to be distinctive of modern eating: delocalization of eating from private households to commercial settings, individualization in the form of more eating alone, and informalization, implying more casual codes of conduct.

We based the analysis on data from two surveys conducted in Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden in 1997 and 2012. The surveys reported in detail one day of eating in representative samples of adult populations in the four countries (N = 4823 and N = 8242). We compared data regarding where, with whom, and for how long people ate, and whether parallel activities took place while eating.

While Nordic people's primary location for eating remained the home and the workplace, the practices of eating in haste, and while watching television increased and using tablets, computers and smart-phones while eating was frequent in 2012. Propensity to eat alone increased slightly in Denmark and Norway, and decreased slightly in Sweden. While such practices vary with socio-economic background, regression analysis showed several changes were common across the Nordic populations. However, the new practice of using tablets, computers, and smartphones while eating was strongly associated with young age. Further, each of the practices appeared to be related to different types of meal. We conclude that while the changes in the social organization of eating were not dramatic, signs of individualization and informalization could be detected.

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1. Introduction

Eating is a routinized activity embedded in the flow of activities, events and relations making up everyday life. It is influenced by the broader social organization of time and space in society and its institutional arrangements, and it is regulated by norms and conventions which vary with social and cultural context. Thus, the study of eating patterns is an entry point to the wider study of the social organization of daily life.

In social research as well as in public discourse there is a recurrent debate over whether, and how, the social organization of eating has changed. There is an underlying interest in this discourse in the kinds of change in social life that are attested by new eating patterns. These are, for example, changes in the social cohesion of families and other groups, the socialization of new generations, and social interactions in work and private life (See Brannen, O'Connell, & Mooney, 2013; Cheng, Olsen, Southerton, & Warde, 2007; DeVault, 1991; Mäkelä, 2009; Mestdag, 2005; Mestdag &

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Glorieux, 2009; Yates & Warde, 2015). In this article we contribute to this debate by analyzing changes in the social organization of eating in four Nordic countries over the fifteen-year period 1997–2012. The analysis is based on surveys conducted at each end of the study period. It draws on measures of eating and contextual factors such as where eating takes place, in what company, for how long, and how the eating is arranged in terms of seating arrangements and activities during eating.

2. Theoretical background

There is a common sociological assumption, often repeated in analyses of our times, that our cultures are becoming gradually de-traditionalized and individualized (Giddens, 1990; Heelas, Lash, & Morris, 1996), and that social norms of behavior — or 'etiquette' — are less formal than they once were (Wouters, 2007). In connection with food and eating the concept of *gastro-anomy* (Fischler, 1988b, 2011) summarizes the idea that eating patterns have become irregular and individualized, and that cultural norms are dissolving. In discussions of modernization this development is often welcomed on the grounds that it fosters the freedom of the individual and enlarges the cultural space of human action (Wouters, 2007). However, where food and meals are concerned, the development is often associated with fear of loss of social cohesion (Andersen, 1997; Fischler, 2011; Mennell, Murcott, & van Otterloo, 1992).

Eating is an important operator of social life and a primary social function (Fischler, 2011). In private households meals have been described as the medium by which families are created and re-created on a daily basis (DeVault, 1991; Jackson, 2009; Julier, 2013), and family meals are seen as important arenas in which children are socialized into central cultural norms and values (Fischler, 2011; Ochs & Shohet, 2006). In the social world beyond private households meals are events, which organize social groups through in- and exclusions and make social equality or hierarchy manifest (Douglas & Gross, 1981). It is often hypothesized that, in postindustrial societies, eating has become more individualized and flexible, and that eating patterns have become irregular and de-structured (Falk, 1994; Mintz, 1996; Whit, 1995). It is inferred that more eating takes place alone, a development which has been linked to concerns about the disruption of family meals and family life in general (Jackson, 2009; Murcott, 1997).

But how we eat, where, when and with whom, is influenced by the social organization of work and family life, and the physical locality of private homes and workplaces, as well as the rhythm and organization of the workday. This is demonstrated in Rotenberg's (1981) analysis of the change from a five-meal to a three-meal daily pattern following industrialization in Vienna. In the course of this change the location of daily meals retreated: it had included the home, the workplace and public cafés, but came to include only the home and the workplace. Changes also occurred to the social company in which eating took place, which now included only family members and colleagues and no longer the personal friends or old school mates whom many men had formerly met in cafés and pubs on an everyday basis (Rotenberg, 1981). In modern life the daily organization of eating also depends on institutional and practical arrangements in society, such as the size and composition of households, the arrangement of public catering at work places and educational institutions and the accessibility of commercial venues for eating out. It has been suggested that the home may no longer be the primary location for meals, as eating is increasingly taking place in public places and commercial premises such as restaurants, cafés, fast-food outlets, and so forth, and in public welfare institutions such as canteens (Cheng et al., 2007; Dinkins, 1992; Dumangan & Hackett, 1995; Julier, 2013; Mandemakers &

Roeters, 2015; Mogelonsky, 1998). It follows that we might expect a decline in eating at home in the Nordic countries, and a rise in eating out.

By tradition, eating is subject to strong normative regulation: in all societies and communities models of proper eating exist, not only with regard to how foods should be ordered, in terms of combination and sequence (Douglas, 1975; Fischler, 1988a; Murcott, 1982), but also regarding the very conduct of eating. "The civilizing process" has been coined as a phrase describing the historical process from medieval times to the end of the nineteenth century during which, among other things, rules of table manners became more formal, and detailed, and spread from the upper classes in France to elites across Europe and thence gradually to the lower social classes (Elias, 2000; Mennell,). A reversal of this development is identified in the theory of informalization, according to which in the course of the twentieth century manners have become less formal and more lenient. This is seen as the result of a 'trickle-up' process linked to large-scale social mobility whereby the norms of ascendant groups mix with those of the established higher groups into which they are ascending (Wouters, 2007). Thus, while in medieval time manners of eating varied greatly between social classes, such variation is seen to be diminishing in modern times. Still, even in the 1960s Bourdieu identified distinct differences between the conduct of festive meals in working-class and bourgeois families: the abundance and loose sequencing order of working class meals witnessing informality and liberty *versus* the strict rhythm, formality and stylization of bourgeois meals, implying restraint, self-control, and an emphasis on form and manner (Bourdieu, 1984: 196). Similar patterns have been identified in Denmark, where menus of working class festive meals were found to signal fellowship and community while those of the middle class underlined individuality and the competence of the host (Holm, 2013).

Following Wouters' theory of informalization we could presume that rules of good eating conduct, or table manners, are not as strict as they once were and allow for more individual variation and heterogeneous behavior. For example, it has been suggested that the meal is losing its significance as an event in its own right, since eating events increasingly take place simultaneously with other activities (such as walking down a street, working at a desk, or watching television) (Andersen, 1997; Bugge & Døving, 2000; Gemming, Doherty, Utter, Shields, & Ni Mhurchu, 2015; Senauer, Asp, & Kinsey, 1991).

Empirical data, which provide systematic evidence for changes over time in the localization and conduct of eating, are rare. Time-use data form an exception and some studies based on such data show some general trends in e.g. a decline in time used for cooking, but also that trends with regard to time spent eating in the home and outside the home are not uniform across countries (Bonke, 2002; Cheng et al., 2007; Mestdag & Glorieux, 2009; Mestdag & Vandeweyer, 2005; Mestdag, 2005; Statistics Sweden, 2003; Warde, Cheng, Olsen, & Southerton, 2007).

However, time-use analyses address very few aspects of eating. For a more composite picture of the daily eating practices of populations a more comprehensive analysis of various aspects of the organization of eating is required. Our study is a contribution to this kind of analysis.

3. Aim of the article

We aim to analyze in some detail changes in the conduct of eating in the Nordic countries between the late 1990s and the early 2010s. This was a period in which discussions of a possible de-structuring of meal patterns intensified. It is an empirical question whether the discussed changes did actually occur during this