



Research report

Destructuration or continuity? The daily rhythm of eating in Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden in 1997 and 2012 [☆]



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 13 January 2014

Received in revised form 15 June 2014

Accepted 7 July 2014

Available online 10 July 2014

Keywords:

Everyday eating rhythms

Historical transformations

Temporal destructuration

Cross-country comparison

Nordic countries

Sequence analysis

ABSTRACT

There is a widely shared belief that contemporary eating culture is undergoing a process of 'destructuration' in which collective norms guiding temporal, social, and spatial aspects of eating as well as cuisine will decline or disappear. From another theoretical perspective one could argue that shared and regular patterns are quite resistant to change because they are functionally necessary for the organization and maintenance of social actions in everyday life. Using questionnaire data from Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden from the years 1997 and 2012 we investigate whether culturally shared timing of eating rhythms has disappeared or declined. At the population-wide level, we find clear national peaks (occurring around breakfast, lunch, and to a lesser extent dinner) during which a great number, or even the majority, of people eat. These basic rhythms of eating are nationally specific and clearly identifiable in 1997 and 2012, and only small changes were found to have occurred over the period studied. Subsequent examination of within-country differences in daily eating rhythms identified a specific sub-population with very similar features in all countries. The sub-population deviates temporally from the collective peaks of eating, and in it conventional meal types such as breakfast and lunch are skipped to a higher extent, giving what we call an 'unsynchronized' eating pattern. Interestingly, the pattern has become more common in all countries. While the growth of this sub-population may be a sign of a coming destructuration of meal culture, further analysis suggests this is not the case. Thus, we find clear socio-structural explanations for unsynchronized eating. It is related to the social coordination of work, and unsynchronized eating tends to be abandoned over the life course: with the establishment of a family, and old age, people tend to synchronize their eating habits with collective activities in society. Coupling this with the relatively modest growth of the unsynchronized pattern, and bearing in mind that it is a minority phenomenon, encompassing approximately one quarter of the population in 2012, we argue that an all-encompassing temporal destructuration will not develop. Additional analysis shows that the idea of a simultaneous rupture of eating culture on several dimensions (temporal, social, spatial, manners, cuisine) is doubtful. Thus, although, to a higher extent, individuals with an unsynchronized eating rhythm lack "manners" and eat more unhealthily, they do not display a higher degree of destructuration in the social and spatial dimensions of eating. Indeed, unsynchronized eating leads to fewer daily eating events, which contradicts the 'grazing' theory altogether.

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[☆] *Acknowledgements:* The analysis presented in the present paper was based on two Nordic studies: *A Day of Food in Nordic Countries, A comparative investigation of eating habits in modern everyday life* (1997), and *Food in Nordic Everyday Life: A comparative survey of change and stability in eating patterns* (2012). Both studies were supported financially by the Joint Committee for Nordic Research Councils for the Social Sciences (NOS-S) and for the humanities and the Social Sciences (NOS-HS). The study designs were devised together by the project partners: Marianne Pipping Ekström (Centre for Consumer Science, University of Gothenburg), Jukka Gronow, Lotte Holm (University of Copenhagen), Unni Kjærnes (National Institute for Consumer Research, Oslo), Thomas Bøker Lund, Johanna Mäkelä (University of Helsinki), and Mari Niva (National Consumer Research Centre, Helsinki).

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Is eating becoming destructured?

Writers in the mass media and scientific literature have been asking for some time whether traditional, regular dining patterns and meal formats have given way to a more irregular and destructured style of eating in which the collective rules organizing temporal, social, and spatial dimensions of eating are disappearing (Caplan, 1997; Mestdag, 2005; Murcott, 1995, 1997; Southerton, Díaz-Méndez, & Warde, 2012). The same thesis, the most popular form of which points to the abandonment of family meals,

has been advocated in one form or another for at least half a century. Family meals – regular meals eaten at home together with all or most family members – have given way, it is said, to snacking and the consumption of fast food. Market researchers have created the term ‘grazing’ (Caplan, 1997) to describe this allegedly new way of eating. A hamburger and a coke bought from a burger joint and enjoyed hurriedly while driving a car are perhaps the most stereotypical expression of grazing. In a similar vein, Jean-Pierre Poulain (2002; see also Poulain, 2008) has referred to ‘vagabond feeding’ or ‘nibbling’. Fischler (1990) once presented the most radical claim in sociological terms. He suggested that we are increasingly living in a state of ‘gastro-anomie’, where cultural norms regulating eating have either almost disappeared, or become more incoherent, and no longer offer enough guidance to everyday eating. Fischler did, of course set the bar high: his ideal society involved well-organized classical French cuisine, with its extensive three-course lunches and dinners prepared and eaten at home in accordance with traditional table manners.

The question whether today’s daily eating habits resemble the more traditional home-based, family-centered ideal, or are increasingly characterized by individualization, grazing, and gastro-anomie, is empirical (Jackson, Olive, & Smith, 2009). Yet with some exceptions (Mestdag, 2005; Poulain, 2002) empirical studies looking into it have been sparse so far. One reason for this may be that the issue cannot be examined in sufficient detail using typical questionnaire studies. This is because these labels, and the meanings they convey, relate to a simultaneous decline in several factors such as shared temporal rhythms (grazing and vagabond feeding), spatial co-ordination (grazing and vagabond feeding), social meals, and the ability of cultures to impose norms regarding cuisine (gastro-anomie). To investigate most or all of these aspects of eating rather comprehensive data sets are needed in which micro-behavioral aspects of everyday life are tracked in detail. Methods such as time-use studies and 24-hour recall studies of the sort common in nutrition studies would be appropriate for this purpose.

In this study, we aim to evaluate at least some of the assertions about contemporary eating culture summarized above. We use data that were collected at two separate time points and include a fair amount of the micro-behavioral information needed to address a number of the assertions. We focus on the temporal dimension of eating and ask whether culturally shared timing of eating rhythms has disappeared or, less dramatically, is declining. In her study of Flemish eating practices, Mestdag (2005) paid equal attention to the temporal, commensal, and spatial dimensions of changed eating patterns in the period 1988–1999. We focus on the temporal dimension of eating in this study, because we believe that a shared temporal rhythm is an underlying base that all the other aspects of meal culture (such as spatial co-ordination, social meals, cuisine, and dietary quality) rest on. The daily schedule of activities in general (Southerton, 2013) and eating specifically (Southerton et al., 2012) – that is, how many times, and when, typical eating takes place, and how those events are ordered – is arguably a basic characteristic of any cultural pattern. For instance, some kind of shared and/or regularly repeated daily order and rhythm of eating is a prerequisite of the sociability of eating. Although having lunch at the same time as others, like family members or colleagues, does not in itself guarantee that it was enjoyed in the company of those others, without shared mealtimes eating together would not be possible at all. Collective conventions about cuisine are an extra layer of food culture in which the shared timings of meals and the consumption of meals together with others are required. The assumption that when eating becomes desocialized and irregular the healthiness of the associated diet is threatened – a hypothesis referred to in Caplan (1997), which also receives some support in nutrition studies (e.g. Hammons & Fiese, 2011) – also presupposes that the temporal co-ordination of eating has declined.

A further reason for focusing on temporal rhythm is that, from another theoretical perspective, the individual timing of eating and institutional timings can be viewed as functionally interwoven. Eating times are arguably both conditioned by, and change with, other institutional arrangements and, in return, exercise their own influence on them (Southerton et al., 2012). Also, the few large-scale historical studies that exist suggest that changes in the production mode of societies and the resulting re-institutionalization of work routines, determine eating routines profoundly. The five-meal pattern that was common practice, at least among professional men in many European commercial cities at the turn of the previous century had been largely abandoned by the 1930s (Rotenberg, 1981). By then, industrialization had brought about real change in societal structures and urban space. Workplaces were now located at the periphery of the city. A greater proportion of the workforce was employed in wage-based work and no longer worked in smaller family-owned businesses. Work days involved strict time-management discipline. Breaks became shorter. Following these, and similar changes, the three-meal pattern typical of industrial societies emerged, with the family meal taking place at the end of the working day and lunch eaten at work. A further common meal type, which can be more or less ritualized and variable in terms of content and timing, is assumed to exist today alongside the three main meals of the day: the snack (e.g. Poulain, 2002).¹ A similar, but historically delayed, conversion from a pre-industrial to an industrial eating rhythm has been identified among Finnish peasants (Prättälä & Helminen, 1990). In this theoretical framework, grazing, individualized eating, vagabond feeding and similar labels imply that this temporal coordination of macro-institutional settings and routines at the micro level of actions is disappearing, or has disappeared. With the focus on the temporal dimension of eating, it becomes possible to evaluate the credibility of these two competing assumptions.

Although we concentrate on the temporal rhythms of eating, we do not neglect further dimensions of destructureation, grazing, and gastro-anomie. Thus, where temporal disorder is identified we also ask whether spatial and social dimensions, as well as other eating-related norms, decline correspondingly.

Our research questions and data considerations

Questionnaire data collected in the Nordic countries (Denmark, Finland, Norway, and Sweden) in 1997 and 2012 are used to examine whether culturally shared eating rhythms have disappeared or are decreasing. We set up two basic research questions:

Firstly, we examine whether culturally shared eating rhythms can be discerned in 1997 and 2012 in all four Nordic countries. As part of this, we also ask whether any noteworthy changes have taken place in the period 1997–2012.

Secondly, where it is possible to discern such shared rhythms, we investigate whether there is a sub-population that deviates from this collective rhythm. We also analyze whether this sub-population has increased between 1997 and 2012, and whether other socio-structural factors explain such a sub-population, including socio-demographic factors and employment status. Finally, we seek to establish the extent to which this sub-population deviates with respect to other dimensions of food culture (spatial, social, and cultural norms regarding manners/healthy food).

Fifteen years is, admittedly, not a very long period over which to record cultural and social changes in what are arguably rather

¹ Poulain refers to this as the extra-prandial event (Poulain, 2002).

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