

THE SOCIAL ACT OF EATING: THE PSYCHOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

An important perspective about social eating is since everyone must eat, what we eat becomes the most powerful symbol of who we are. Every meal is a message, and where we eat is as important as what we eat in getting the message across. Psychological necessity may overtake the refined communicative value of food, and the only thing that will matter is whether we can get it or not.

Key words: food, eating, nutrition, energy

INTRODUCTION

The truth is that we have to eat; we love to eat and eating makes us feel good. The hunger urge must be satisfied every day, many times. It has become a profoundly social urge. The best part is that food is also an occasion for sharing, for showing your love, for giving or just for expression of altruism, whether from lover to lover or parents to children or simply strangers or visitors. Moreover, eating has become a fundamentally rewarding behavior, and is intrinsically linked to mood and emotions.

Food is the most important thing a mother gives to a child and in most parts of the world, the mother's milk is still the only safe food for infants. The moment we are born, we need to eat so food becomes in reality love and security.

Our bodies are like tiny factories that need fuel to work properly. Our fuel is the food. Unlike the animals, we cook. The animals have the same hunger urge we have, but the cooking is not only a necessity, it is a symbol for our humanity. Usually eating is a group event so food becomes a focus of symbolic activity about sociality and our place in society. Eating may be initiated or prolonged by the presence of others.

In contrast to our ancestors, whose primary task was to seek out any food that would provide energy and nutrients, those choices have become more difficult nowadays. When humans are energy deficient, a complex interplay of physiological processes signals the brain that food should be consumed and on the other side when enough food has been consumed, these processes signal that consumption should be terminated. Eating healthily also means to be able to enjoy the rewarding aspects of food

without falling prey to a loss of control over eating. The good part is that many people are able to do this successfully, yet some exhibit over-regulation of eating behavior resulting in underweight and malnutrition or on the other side of the extreme, permanent failures of self-regulation may result in overweight and obesity. Even if obesity is an age-old health condition, its prevalence has dramatically increased in the second half of the twentieth century. In most cases, obesity is the result of poor dietary habits.

All cultures go to considerable lengths to obtain preferred foods and often ignore valuable food sources close at hand. Jews have a whole litany of forbidden foods; Mohammedans refuse pork; the English do not eat horse and dog; Hindus taboo beef – and the list can continue. People will not eat anything, whatever the circumstances.

MATERIAL AND METHOD

Showing who you are by what you eat

An important perspective about social eating is since everyone must eat, what we eat becomes the most powerful symbol of who we are. To set yourself apart from others by what you will and will not eat is a social barrier. You identify yourself with others by eating the same things in the same way. But to be able to achieve such identification, people will struggle to eat things they loath and avoid perfectly tasty food that is on the forbidden list.

In the well know process of social climbing people have to learn to like caviar, snails, artichokes, scorn dumplings, fish and chips and meat and potato pie, sea fruits and so on. There are some more nutritious food but fatally tainted with lower – class associations. Just like in fashion, or music there are so many kinds of food identification.

A universally sign of outsider status? Not knowing how to eat “properly”. Proper eating includes the kind of food used, the way of preparing it, the manner of serving it and the way of eating it. The social climbers in the West can be spotted immediately by their inability to master the details of place settings, in some places using the wrong fork is an offense as bad as spitting in public. Since anyone wishing to integrate himself into a group must eat with it, there is no surer way of marking off those who are in and those out than by food etiquette. Fingers may have been made before forks, but ever since Catherine (and Marie) de Medici brought these essential tools for noodle eating from northern Italy to France, the perfectly useful finger has been socially out, except for fruit and cheese. It took the elaborate dining habits of the upper classes to refine the use of multiple forks (as well as knives, spoons, and glasses).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The timing of eating shows up class differences. In the past, as in the novels of Jane Austen, for example, the upper classes breakfasted late (about 10 o'clock), as befitted their leisure status. (This distinguished them from the lower orders, who eat very early before going off to work.) They had perhaps an informal lunch of cold meats, but the next main meal was dinner, which was eaten anywhere between five and seven, depending on the pretensions of the family. A light supper might be served before bedtime. The lower orders, meanwhile, would be eating a light midday meal and then a hearty tea after the day's work was done, with again a supper before bed.

The importance of "lunch" as a main meal came later from the business community, and "dinner" was pushed back into the evening, with supper more or less abolished. The lower orders continued to make midday "dinner" and "high tea" major meals, and since dinner was pushed later for the middle classes, "tea" became an institution around four o'clock. There is no nutritional sense to the timing of eating. It could be done differently. In France, the enormous midday meal, with its postprandial siesta, is what the day revolves around. The entire country comes to a stop and wakes up again between three and four.

The order in which foods are eaten, which really does not matter, becomes highly ritualistic: Soup, fish, poultry, meat, dessert (which echoes the process of evolution) becomes a standard. Sweet should not be eaten before savory, and rarely (in France never) with. The French eat salad after the main dish, the Americans rigidly before; the English, to the disgust of both, put it on the same plate as the (cold) meat. In the East, it is more common to serve all the food together, often in communal dishes, and allow a wide sampling of different items. In the more individualistic West, place settings are rigidly set off from each other, and so are "courses". The serving of wine with food becomes even more rigidly a matter of protocol, and operates to mark off differences of status within classes: those who "know" wine and those who don't.

The message behind what food we share

Foreign foods tend to be shunned by the working classes, but among the upper-middle and upper they become items of prestige. A knowledge of foreign food indicates the eaters' urbanity and cosmopolitanism. The conspicuous consumption of food has always been important as an indicator of status, from three thousand pigs at a New Guinea feast to mountains of caviar and truffles at little Max Spielberg's fourth birthday party. Lavish food entertainment is part of the ancient tradition of food hospitality used

mainly to impress strangers.

The French anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss, like all his countrymen attuned to the niceties of food customs, notes how we reserve "rich food for the grandest occasions. The ordinary daily menu is not served." These are some of the delicacies which one would not buy and consume alone without a vague feeling of guilt", he maintains. And this "rich food. has nothing much to do with "the mere satisfaction of physiological needs." It is food meant to be shared, and to be shared with those we wish to impress. To feed someone is one of the most direct and intimate ways to convey something of ourselves to the ones we want to impress. We are never just saying, "see how we can satisfy your hunger." We are saying more like "see how lavish and hospitable and knowledgeable we are." Of the most basic things in our behavioral repertoire, eating is the most accessible and effective for conveying our messages to others.

Every meal is a message, and where we eat is as important as what we eat in getting the message across. Why do we not eat all our meals in the dining room? Its name would suggest that this is its purpose. But the very fact that we call it the "dining" room and not the "eating" room, tells its own story. The dining room is usually reserved for "ceremonial" meals: those involving extended families on special occasions - older relatives, in-laws, and important guests to be impressed. It is probably the most absurdly underused room in the house, and a conspicuous waste of space. The whole idea of separating the dining room from the kitchen was, of course, part of the general middle-class attempt to ape the upper class.

Fashion of food

The myth of nutrition is shown up by rapid changes in food fashions. Availability is of course important. As waves of different foods hit Europe, eating habits changed. At first these foreign foods, particularly spices, like foreign fashions were a privilege of the rich, but they soon percolated down. Just as clothes indicate our trendiness, so does food. When grande cuisine French cooking was in, it too was extolled as "healthy". Now sushi is a fad, raw fish is praised as a "high-protein, low-fat" source, ignoring the high rates of stomach cancer in Japan. Food snobbism has now become as refined as wine snobbism. Not knowing about kiwi fruit tart or fresh coriander or how to prepare a ristafel or couscous in the authentic fashion, marks one as a social failure. As with all fashion industries, food fashion thrives on change; it demands it. The vast industry can only survive if peoples tastes are constantly induced to change.

This goes along with the modern obsession with diets. Previously, diets were only for health reasons, rarely to do with weight and appearance as such.

Now they are mainly concerned with weight reduction, significantly referred to as “slimming”, the slim figure rather than the healthy body being the aim despite pious claims to the contrary. They are a major part of the food-fashion industry. In fact, none of them work. If any one did, then there would not be so many and we would not be faced almost weekly with the announcement of a new and infallible one.

Seduction with food

Feeding has always been closely linked with courtship. The males and females of all species, including our own, seem to be involved in this mating gamble with food as the bait. Even if the male is not himself the food, he universally seems to have to make some show of feeding to be acceptable. With humans this works two ways since we are the only animals who cook: the bride is usually appraised for her cooking ability. But food and sex are generally closely linked. They are physically linked in the limbic system of the brain, which controls emotional activity generally. It is not surprising that we not only link them but do so emotionally.

The choice of setting for food and courtship is as important as the food itself.

There is a tendency to move gradually (or swiftly as the case may be) from the public to the private. For modern urban couples, “dates” usually begin in a crowded public place such as a bar or disco. On the crucial “second date”, they may move to a restaurant, where the male is able to demonstrate his “resource accrual ability” by paying the bill.

CONCLUSIONS

Apart from the physiological prediction, we can be sure that eating as display - as a code of messages about selves and status, role and religion, race and nation - will persist in an animal that lives by symbolic communication. Soon, psychological necessity may overtake the refined communicative value of food, and the only thing that will matter is whether we can get it or not.

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