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Commensal eating patterns: a community study

Jeffery Sobal*, Mary K. Nelson

Division of Nutritional Sciences, Cornell University, MVR Hall, Ithaca, NY 14853, USA

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Abstract

Commensality is eating with other people, and commensal eating patterns reflect the social relationships of individuals. This study examined usual meal partners in commensal units and frequency of eating with others in commensal circles among 663 adults responding to a mailed questionnaire in one community. Meal partner data revealed that most respondents ate alone at breakfast, alone or with co-workers at lunch, and with family members at dinner. Commensal frequency data revealed some eating at the homes of other family members, little eating at friends' homes, and almost no eating at neighbors' homes. Few demographic variations existed in commensal eating, except that unmarried individuals more often ate breakfast and dinner alone and more often ate with friends. These findings suggest that contemporary work-oriented society may lead people to eat alone during the day but share evening meals with family, and that people maintain commensal relationships primarily with family members rather than friends or neighbors. Peoples' social worlds appear to be focused on the nuclear family, and family members are also the people they usually eat with.

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Introduction

Food is not only good to eat, it is also good to share. Shared eating satisfies a need for interaction by a union with others, where conviviality establishes and reinforces social ties (Simmel, 1961; Symons, 1994). The rituals of joint eating build regularized personal relationships that establish and maintain desired forms of social integration and establish and reinforce common identities (Bossard & Boll, 1956; Mennell, Murcott, & van Otterloo, 1992). Eating together operates to develop functional relationships between individuals as well as nurturing and fueling their bodies.

Commensality is the concept used to describe eating with others (Mars, 1997; Morrison, 1996; Sobal, 2000). Commensal eating reflects the structures and shapes of 'social morphology' (Grignon, 2001) in the form of food relationships (Beardsworth & Keil, 1997; Germov & Williams, 1999; McIntosh, 1996; Mennell et al., 1992). Davidoff (1976:124) notes that "who partakes of the meal, when and where, helps to create the boundaries of the household, of friendship patterns, of kinship gradations...

These eating patterns vary between and help to define the boundaries of classes, ethnic, religious, age, and sexual groups."

Structurally, commensality can be conceptualized in terms of commensal units and commensal circles (Sobal, 2000; Sobal, Bove, & Rauschenbach, 2002), which demarcate and shape peoples' social worlds. Commensal units are groups of people assembled at a particular time and specific place to consume meals, snacks, or beverages (Ashkenazi, 1991; Powers & Powers, 1984; Sobal, 2000; Sobal et al., 2002). The family is the most fundamental commensal unit, although others include work groups on lunch breaks, friends eating together at a restaurant, neighbors sharing a beverage as they chat over a fence, and other types of eating partners. Inclusion and exclusion in various commensal units establishes commensal circles, which are networks of relationships that delineate the range of people whom individuals could, have, and do eat with (Sobal, 2000; Sobal et al., 2002). Families form the core of most commensal circles (Charles & Kerr, 1988; DeVault, 1991; Holm, 2001a), with particular friends, co-workers, neighbors, and others also included and excluded from commensal eating arrangements. Commensal circles are reflected in the frequency of commensal relationships with categories of people and particular individuals.

* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: js57@cornell.edu (J. Sobal).

Two perspectives offer different interpretations of contemporary commensal patterns: (1) cultural values, and (2) structural individualism. Both perspectives have some support (largely from qualitative research), but there is a lack of generalizable data providing consistent evidence for either perspective.

A cultural values perspective emphasizes the strength of traditional normative pressures to engage in commensal eating with appropriate partners. Cultural values thinking suggests that social norms have been established about a 'proper' or 'ideal' meal that specify it should be eaten with others (Charles & Kerr, 1988; Douglas, 1972, 1984; Douglas & Nicod, 1974; Holm, 2001b; Murcott, 1982, 1983, 1997). Eating alone is devalued and is not considered a 'real' meal for many people (Sobal, 2000; Sobal et al., 2002). Rodrigues and Almeida (1996) reported that almost all people they surveyed thought that an ideal meal should be eaten with the company of others. Prattala, Pelto, Pelto, Ahola, and Rananen (1993:97) found that only a few percent of Finns eat dinners alone because they believe that 'eating company is important in making a meal a real one.'

A structural individualism perspective emphasizes the effects of social isolation and the fast pace of mass society in a post-industrial era as a hindrance to commensal eating. Structural individualism thinking suggests that the rootlessness and alienation of post-industrial societies lead to eating outside an established cuisine in a state of 'gastro-anomie' (Fischler, 1988) that includes eating without others whom provide social support, especially in family meals (Rotenberg, 1981). Dietary individualization is common in contemporary food culture (Bove, Sobal, & Rauschenbach, 2003; Counihan, 1992), and includes loss of traditional collective eating identities that are shared during regular commensal meals (Valentine, 1999; Warde, 1997; Warde & Martens, 2000). Eating alone or outside the social control of others may lead to a risk of engaging in unhealthy eating behaviors and potential diet-related illnesses (Sidenvall, Nydahl, & Fjellstroem, 2000; Torrez, McIntosh, & Kubena, 1992).

Cultural values and structural individualism are not mutually exclusive perspectives, and both may operate simultaneously or interact. Both perspectives provide useful interpretations of commensal data.

Relatively few published studies provide quantitative data about commensal units and commensal circles. Commensal unit research has focused on frequency of family eating. For example, US couples reported they averaged about 10 shared weekly meals (Shattuck, White, & Kristal, 1992), Australian spouses about 12 meals together per week (Craig & Truswell, 1988), and partners in the Netherlands averaged 13 joint weekly meals (Feunekes, de Graaf, Meyboom, & van Staveren, 1998). In the UK, 80% of men and 73% of women claimed that the entire family ate a meal together every day (most often dinner on weekdays), with 20% of women and 12% of men reporting full-family eating only on weekends (Thomas, 1982). Warde and

Martens (2000) also found that about three fourths of UK adults report eating family meals together. In the US, 95% of mothers and 85% of fathers reported eating the evening meal together with young children (Gillespie & Achterberg, 1989). An older US study of adolescent girls reported that 88% stated they usually ate dinner and 54% usually ate breakfast with their parents (Hertzler, Yamanaka, Nenninger, & Abernathy, 1976). Another US study found that the percent of adolescents who reported eating with their family five or more times per week was 12% for breakfast, 5% for lunch, and 69% for dinner (Ackard & Neumark-Sztainer, 2001). A US survey found that adolescents reported on average eating meals with all or most of their family at home 4.5 ± 3.3 times in the past week (Neumark-Sztainer, Hannan, Story, Croll, & Perry, 2003).

Relatively little research has quantitatively examined commensal circles. For example, in Australia 57% of adults reported that they ate at their parents' homes, but only 20% ate with friends (Craig & Truswell, 1988). In a US survey, one third of respondents reported eating alone on weekdays, fewer ate alone on weekends, and joint eating was mostly with family, alone, or with friends (Rodrigues & Almeida, 1996). In Denmark, Sweden, and Norway most eating occurred at home, some at work, and little in other places (Holm, 2001a).

These diverse studies of commensal units and commensal circles were conducted on several continents across multiple decades using small and often unrepresentative samples of various age groups, and conceptualized commensality in several ways. The scattered existing studies do not provide a consensus about the types, prevalence, and patterns of commensality.

The lack of published data from representative samples about the prevalence and patterns of commensality and the absence of quantitative research examining commensal units and commensal circles led us to examine these issues further. We hypothesized that cultural values about commensal eating would lead people to eat with others most of the time rather than primarily eating alone because of structural individualism. We hypothesized a lower prevalence of daytime commensality due to occupational demands (Devine, Connors, Sobal, & Bisogni, 2003; Holm, 2001a), and a higher prevalence of evening commensality due to norms for proper meals and family dinners (Holm, 2001b; Murcott, 1982). Reflecting the dominance of family and work roles in contemporary society (DeVault, 1991; Devine et al., 2003; Holm, 2001a), commensal partners were hypothesized to be primarily families and secondarily co-workers. Commensal patterns were hypothesized to include more frequent commensality for women due to their more extensive food roles (DeVault, 1991), younger people because of their larger social networks (Torrez et al., 1992), minority ethnic groups due to their greater involvement with extended kin (Devine, Sobal, Bisogni, & Connors, 1999), married people whose spouses involve them in shared eating networks (Sobal et al., 2002), people

in large households which offer greater availability of commensal partners (Douglas, 1984), people of higher socioeconomic status whose resources facilitate commensal eating (Fitchen, 1988; Holm, 2001a), and employed people who form eating relationships with co-workers (Devine et al., 2003). These hypotheses were examined in an exploratory quantitative study using a large community survey.

Methods

This analysis used data from a cross-sectional survey (Nelson, 2000) that examined the prevalence and patterns of commensality in one US county in 1999. The county had a population of 97,000 residents who represented rural, suburban and city consumers and included a diversity of ethnic and class groups. A mail questionnaire was designed, reviewed for content and format by social scientists and nutritionists, pilot tested on six consumers at a shopping mall to examine its clarity and level of response burden, and revised based on feedback from these pre-testing procedures. Procedures in the study were approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) University Committee on Human Subjects (UCHS).

Two different assessments of commensality were developed: Commensal units as meal partners, and commensal circles as commensal frequency. Meal partner commensality was assessed using three open-ended questions that asked respondents to report their usual commensal partners for major meals: 'With whom to you most often eat: breakfast, lunch, dinner?' The responses to these questions were coded into the categories of alone, with spouse/partner, with family/children, with co-workers, other, and usually not eating that meal. For bivariate and multivariate logistic regression analyses, responses were recoded into a dichotomy of eating alone versus eating with others.

Commensal frequency was assessed using questions that asked respondents how often they ate at the homes of people occupying three different roles in their non-nuclear family commensal circles: kin, friends, and neighbors. The question stated 'How often do you: Eat at the homes of family? Eat at the homes of friends? Eat at the homes of neighbors?' with daily, weekly, monthly, rarely never being the response options. These assessments examined commensality outside the nuclear family, and did not consider commensal circles within nuclear families. For bivariate and multivariate logistic regression analyses of commensal frequency variables, responses were collapsed into a dichotomy of daily/weekly versus monthly/rarely/never.

Sociodemographic variables were assessed to describe the characteristics of the sample and examine variations in commensal patterns. These variables included gender, ethnicity, age, education, employment, household size, marital status, and being a college/university student. For bivariate and multivariate analyses, some of these variables

were recoded into dichotomies (being employed, married, white, and a student).

The sample sought to represent the population of adults living in one community. A random sample of one upstate New York county's residents' addresses was obtained based on telephone book listings supplemented by voter registration data to better represent residents without telephones or with unlisted telephone numbers. The mailing procedures were guided by the Total Design Method outlined by Dillman (1978). The original mailing included a cover letter and questionnaire, which was followed by a postcard reminder to all of those included in the original mailing. A second mailing with a questionnaire was sent to those who had not responded to the first mailing, and a third mailing with a questionnaire was sent to those had not yet responded.

A total of 1200 questionnaires were originally mailed, with 169 returned as undeliverable, 4 returned by people not eligible for inclusion, 16 replied stating they declined to participate, and 351 not returned. A total of 663 usable questionnaires were analyzed, constituting a 64% overall response rate (663 of 1031).

Responses to the three mailings produced 449 from the first, 170 from the second, and 45 from the third, suggesting that additional mailings would probably not have produced substantially more responses. Respondents to the three mailings did not differ significantly in gender, ethnicity, or education, although the elderly were more likely to respond to earlier mailings than young adults ($p < 0.05$), suggesting that with the possible exception of age additional mailings probably would not have produced different types of respondents (Sobal et al., 1990).

Univariate statistical analyses used means and percentages. Bivariate analyses used Chi square and measures of association appropriate to the measurement level of the variables being examined. Multivariable analyses used multiple linear and logistic regressions. For example, logistic regressions were used to simultaneously examine the eight demographic independent variables as predictors of eating alone as a dependent variable. Regression diagnostics were used to examine the influence of outliers that produced skewed variable distributions, multicollinearity between closely related independent variables, and other problematic conditions in regression models (Kleinbaum, Kupper, & Muller, 1988), and bivariate associations were presented instead of multivariate coefficients for ill-fitting regression models (Nelson, 2000). Multiple significance testing increased risk of type I error (Grove & Andreason, 1982), so exact alpha values or alpha levels at $p < 0.05, 0.01$, and 0.001 are presented to allow readers to make their own interpretations of statistical significance (Sobal et al., 1990).

Results

The demographic characteristics of the sample (Table 1) reveal that respondents were evenly divided by gender,

Table 1
Characteristics of the community survey sample

Characteristics	Community survey (%)	Census data (%)
Gender		
Female	46	51
Ethnicity		
White	84	90
Age		
18-34 years	29	54
35-54 years	42	27
Over 55 years	29	19
Education		
H.S. or less	20	33
Some college	18	29
College grad.	30	22
Grad. degree	32	16
Employment		
Employed	66	51
Student	16	28
Other	17	21
Household size		
One person	25	27
Two people	40	34
Three + people	35	39
Marital status		
Never married	26	Not available
Married	47	Not available
Div./Sep./Wid.	27	Not available

almost all were white, most were middle-aged, many were well educated, most were employed, one of four lived alone, and about half were currently married. The sample composition was similar to the US Census data for the county, although the sample was somewhat older, more educated, and more likely to be employed than adults assessed by the census.

The three meal partner questions revealed varying commensal patterns by meal (Table 2). Over half of the sample ate breakfast alone and almost half ate lunch alone, while only about one-sixth ate dinner alone. Other meal partners tended to be family members at breakfast and dinner, and co-workers at lunch. Few ate with others besides family and co-workers at breakfast, but over one in ten ate with others at lunch and dinner. Only a few percent reported usually skipping breakfast, lunch, or dinner.

The three commensal frequency questions identified involvement with kin, friends, and neighbors in commensal circles (Table 2). About one-eighth of the sample reported eating at other family members' homes daily, but daily meals with friends and neighbors were very uncommon. About half rarely or never ate at family members' or friends' homes, and the vast majority rarely/never ate at the homes of neighbors. All of the commensal frequency levels appeared to be relatively low, reinforcing the meal partner

Table 2
Commensality measures

Breakfast commensal partners	
Alone	58% (338)
Partner/spouse	21% (122)
Family/children	14% (80)
Co-worker	2% (13)
Other	3% (19)
Skips the meal	2% (9)
Lunch commensal partners	
Alone	45% (269)
Partner/spouse	13% (79)
Family/children	5% (32)
Co-worker	24% (143)
Other	13% (75)
Skips the meal	<1% (2)
Dinner commensal partners	
Alone	19% (115)
Partner/spouse	37% (223)
Family/children	30% (180)
Co-worker	2% (9)
Other	13% (80)
Skips the meal	<1% (1)
Eat at homes of family	
Daily	13% (86)
Weekly	7% (48)
Monthly	29% (186)
Rarely/never	51% (333)
Eat at homes of friends	
Daily	1% (5)
Weekly	10% (68)
Monthly	39% (252)
Rarely/never	50% (326)
Eat at homes of neighbors	
Daily	<1% (1)
Weekly	2% (15)
Monthly	11% (69)
Rarely/never	87% (562)

findings that people often eat alone and commensal eating focuses on nuclear family members, with some additional commensality with co-workers during the day.

Interrelationships between questions about commensality revealed patterns of commensal consistency and inconsistency across meals (Fig. 1). Over one fourth of the sample ate with others for all meals, a fifth ate breakfast alone but ate lunch and dinner with others, and another fifth ate breakfast and lunch alone but ate dinner with others. About one seventh of these respondents ate all three meals alone.

Consistency existed among the commensal frequency variables that assessed participation in different commensal circles (Fig. 2). Almost three fourths of the sample reported that they rarely ate at the homes of extended family, friends, and neighbors. About one sixth ate at the homes of family

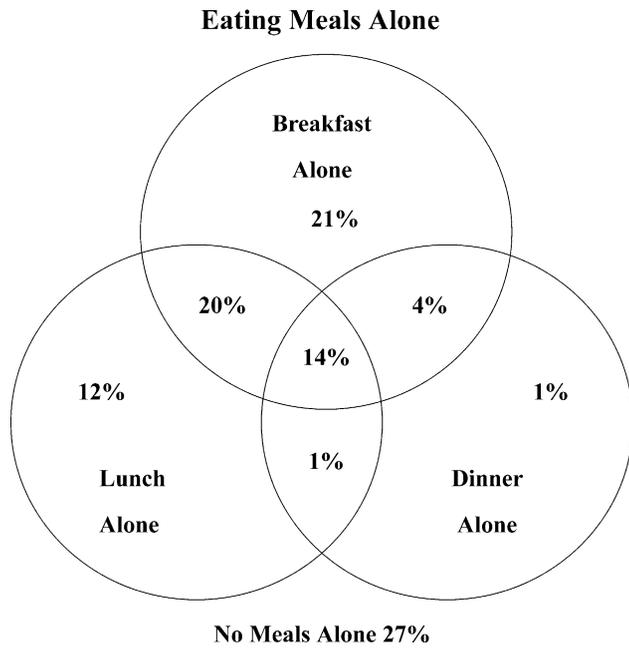


Fig. 1. Eating meals alone.

members at least weekly, but reported they rarely ate at the homes of friends and neighbors.

Few of the eight demographic variables were significantly associated with the commensal measures (Table 3), suggesting a general demographic homogeneity in these commensal patterns. When controlling for other factors, there were no significant gender differences in commensal patterns. Older people less often ate at the homes of friends. People in larger households less often ate dinner alone (but not breakfast or lunch). Non-whites more often ate at other family members' homes. Unmarried people more often ate

Frequency of Eating with Others

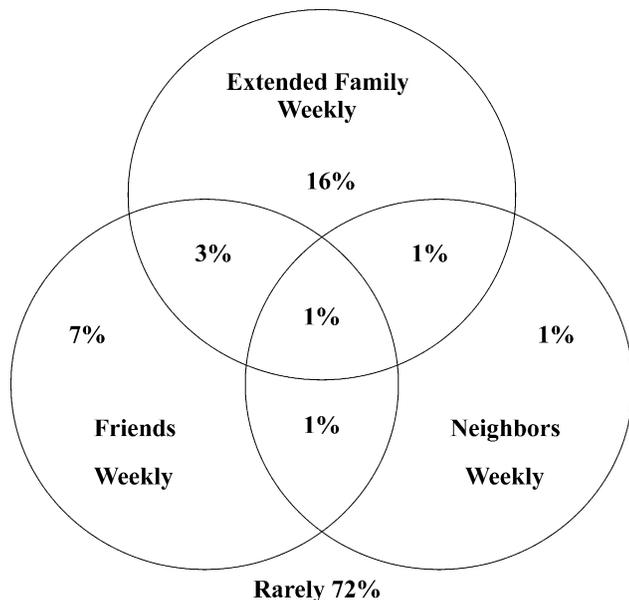


Fig. 2. Frequency of eating with others.

breakfast and dinner alone, and more often ate at the homes of friends. People with higher education levels more often ate at the homes of friends. Employment and being a student were not associated with commensal activities. These regressions suggest that no simple overriding demographic explanations existed for these commensal patterns.

Discussion

This investigation provided new quantitative data about the prevalence and patterns of commensal eating among adults in one community in the US. It was unique in assessing commensal units and commensal circles with specific quantifiable questions that respondents were able to answer, which suggests that these concepts were compatible with the ways people thought about their commensal eating relationships. Analysis of those questions provided information about the prevalence and patterns of those conceptualizations of commensality. Several meal, relationship, and demographic variations in commensal eating patterns were identified.

The nuclear family dominated the composition of reported commensal units (although this did not appear to apply to extended kin), with immediate family members constituting a regular inner commensal circle. Particularly at dinners, which are the most social meal of the day (Sobal, 2000), people reported doing most of their eating with spouses or children. Family members constitute core commensal partners, with co-workers secondary and others peripheral.

Although the nuclear family was the primary commensal unit, considerable solo food consumption was reported. About one fourth of US households are composed of only one person (US Bureau of the Census, 2000), primarily being elderly people and young adults, and the same proportion of the sample in the current study lived alone. People who live alone eat differently than those living with others (Gerritor et al., 1995; Holm, 2001a). It is important to recognize, however, that people who live alone do not necessarily eat alone (Holm, 2001a; Torrez et al., 1992). The non-determinative effect of living alone on eating with others was present in the findings of this survey, with many who did not reside with others in their household still regularly eating commensally with friends.

Breakfast was eaten alone by the majority of respondents. American breakfast is the most anomalous meal, more often small, short, skipped, and involving special foods (Pliner & Rozin, 2000). It appears that breakfast is also a commensal anomaly because it is less often a social meal, with breakfasts taken alone by the majority of individuals. The breakfast ritual (Bossard & Boll, 1956) in this sample appears to be a solo personal food event.

Eating with co-workers was reported by only a minority (about one of four) of respondents, and it occurred almost exclusively at lunch and rarely for other meals. Such

Table 3
Demographic variable associations with commensal measures

Measure	Male	Age	Hsld. size	White	Married	Working	Educ.	Student
Breakfast ^a	-0.11	0.00	-0.02	0.15	-1.53***	0.37	0.08	0.66
Lunch ^a	-0.12	0.13	-0.05	-0.46	-0.32	0.08	0.05	-0.70
Dinner ^a	0.03	0.01	-1.27***	-0.42	-2.49***	-0.39	-0.05	-0.21
Familys ^b	0.39	-0.00	0.03	-0.78**	-0.11	0.30	0.04	-0.59
Friends ^b	0.30	-0.01**	-0.03	-0.19	-0.86**	-0.42	0.20*	-0.13
Neighbors ^b	-0.18	0.02	0.02	0.46	-0.46	1.21	-0.06	2.33

The number of asterisks indicate coefficient significance at * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$. Coding. Breakfast/lunch/dinner: 1 = alone, 0 = other. Familys'/friends'/neighbors' commensal meals: 1 = weekly, 0 = less often. Gender: 1 = male. Hsld. size (household size): 1 = alone, 2 = two people, 3 = three or more people. Race: 1 = non-white, 0 = white. Married: 1 = married, 0 = unmarried. Working: 1 = employed, 0 = not employed. Educ. (education): coded in years. Student: 1 = student, 0 = other.

^a Measures in these cells are linear regression coefficients (Beta).

^b Measures in these cells are logistic regression coefficients (Beta).

infrequent co-worker commensality may be due to time pressures and opportunity costs, with many people not eating lunch because they are too busy or they use lunchtime to do other tasks such as errands or exercising (Devine et al., 2003; Holm, 2001a). While an increasing proportion of time is spent at work and workers engage in primary relationships with their coworkers (Hochschild, 1997), such work immersion does not appear to include much eating together in institutional commensal units (Grignon, 2001). Commensal meals and snacks that are eaten on the job may be based on ritualized work group obligations, comradeship and sociability, or relaxation and stress management.

Friends are important parts of many peoples' lives (Jerome, 1984). However, in this sample they were much less likely to be commensal partners than nuclear or extended family members, with less than half of the respondents reporting regularly eating at the homes of friends. Enactment of friendship often involves informal or public eating or does not involve eating at all (Holm, 2001a), as opposed to commensal eating at the homes of friends.

Neighboring provides close proximity to other people but does not appear to be a strong influence on commensality, as evidenced by the low frequency of eating with neighbors in this study. Spatial accessibility to neighbors apparently does not lead to sharing eating, with only a few percent of the sample eating very often at the homes of their neighbors. Neighboring is often an important part of life (Wethington & Kavey, 2000), particularly for elderly individuals (Phillipson, Bernard, Phillips, & Ogg, 1999). However, this study suggests that neighboring does not often extend to the level of intimacy of commensality.

It was surprising that relatively few consistent demographic patterns existed in the commensal measures examined in this analysis. All types of people have a biological need to eat, and they may interact with others in similar patterns when doing so. The universalism of commensality in American society may lead to relatively

homogeneous commensal patterns. However, some demographic variables were associated with commensality.

Married people more often ate with others at breakfast and dinner, reflecting the commensality inherent in marital relationships (Sobal et al., 2002). Other studies found that newly married people do not always eat breakfast with their spouse, rarely ate weekday lunch with their partner, but consistently sought to share dinner with their mate (Craig & Truswell, 1988; Kemmer, Anderson, & Marshall, 1998a,b; Sobal et al., 2002). Unmarried individuals appear to compensate for their lack of marital commensality by being more likely to eat with friends (Holm, 2001a).

Individuals who are ethnic minorities more often reported that they ate at the homes of family members, which is congruent with previous descriptions of the strength of ethnic kinship relationships in the US that focus on sharing food (Brown & Mussell, 1985; Douglas, 1984; Gabaccia, 1998). Sharing food is one way of transmitting ethnic identity, and regular eating with kin appears to be part of that process (Devine et al., 1999).

This analysis found few educational differences in commensality, possibly because of the limited extent of variability in the education of these respondents. Education is only one component of socioeconomic status. Income influences available food resources that may moderate commensality. Households experiencing poverty may not have sufficient table space, chairs, plates, glasses, or utensils to assemble everyone at one time to engage in commensal eating (Fitchen, 1988). Mothers experiencing food insufficiency often recognize that there is not enough food to adequately feed everyone in the family, and do not eat meals with the rest of the family so that others have food (Fitchen, 1988; Radimer, Olson, Greene, Campbell, & Habicht, 1992; Whitehead, 1984). Also, households of very low socioeconomic status have fewer food resources and may be less likely to invite others to share food at their homes.

Cross-meal commensality can be conceptualized as eating with the same people at different meals, and it appeared to occur especially for nuclear family members who had a stable commensal unit with continuing

commensal rituals. Commensal substitution can be conceptualized as selecting someone from a commensal circle as an alternative to usual or preferred meal partners, and it appeared to occur among individuals in this sample. Very few people ate weekly at the homes of all three commensal groups asked about here (kin, friends, and neighbors), suggesting they were not able to consistently eat with many different types of partners. However, eating with one group was associated with eating with other groups, suggesting that people did not confine themselves to any one of these three commensal circle categories.

This analysis focused on usual commensality, examining peoples' reports of their typical commensal patterns, such as eating with family members. Routine commensal relationships are often ritualized (Bossard & Boll, 1956) to provide regular social interaction. Special commensality (Grignon, 2001) may be socially significant but rare (Holm, 2001a), such as having the opportunity to eat at the same table as a famous person at a unique food event such as a banquet.

The majority of food consumption among individuals in this study appears to be a family or solitary act rather than a more public food event. This supports the interpretation that eating is often a highly functional aspect of life in the contemporary US, driven by hunger and habit as much as by congeniality and collegiality. The McDonaldization of society (Ritzer, 1993, 1998) may be rationalizing not only the food that is consumed, but also the relationships involved in engaging in food consumption.

There are a number of limitations in this investigation. The sample was drawn from only one community in one year, and the findings may not reflect commensal patterns in other communities in the US and other societies or other points in time. While a response rate of almost two-thirds of the sample is typical of many mailed questionnaire studies (Dillman, 1978), the sample was older and more educated than census data for the county. It cannot be determined whether the non-respondents were systematically different in commensal patterns than those who provided the data analyzed here. Self-reported commensality data in a mailed questionnaire may be subject to recall or reporting bias (Boutelle, Lytle, Murray, Bimbaum, & Story, 2001), where some respondents unintentionally or intentionally exaggerate or minimize their responses.

Commensality was assessed using two types of questions, which provided congruent findings. However, other commensal question formats may provide different results. Only selected aspects of commensal units and commensal circles were investigated here. The commensal circle indicators used here only examined joint meal eating outside the family, and further detailed analysis of the specifics of commensal frequency within families and households is needed in future research, as well as examining other shared consumption in addition to meals such as snacks or drinks.

Although household size was examined, this study did not specifically examine the presence and age of children in

these households. The participation of young children may increase family commensality and the duration of mealtimes (Robinson & Godbey, 1997), while older children may miss family meals because of extra-curricular activities (and may lead adults to also miss meals as they transport and accompany children to various activities outside the family).

Commensal reciprocity at home (hosting versus being a guest) was not examined, nor was joint public eating outside the home (e.g. going to restaurants together). The specific location and setting of commensal eating was also not assessed, nor was the duration of commensality. Additionally, while this investigation examined commensal patterns in relationship to employment, it did not consider impacts of other aspects of jobs on joint eating such as type of occupation, work schedules and their regularity, hours of work, and number of employed people in the household.

Understanding commensality may contribute to knowledge about the impact of eating patterns on health. Eating with others (particularly family members) is often viewed as being healthier and more adaptive than eating alone or with strangers. When one person in a regular commensal unit changes their diet, others often change as well (Cohen et al., 1991; Savoca & Miller, 2001; Sexton et al., 1987; Shattuck et al., 1992; White et al., 1991). Possible mechanisms for a commensality–health relationship may include social facilitation, social support, and social control, all of which have both health promoting and health risking potential. Social facilitation leads to more extensive eating and drinking in the presence of others (de Castro & Brewer, 1992; Sobal, 2000), preventing underconsumption but risking overconsumption. Social support from others may encourage eating and healthy food choices (McIntosh, Shifflett, & Picou, 1989; Torrez et al., 1992), but also may risk tempting others with unhealthy foods. Social control over eating may be exercised to sanction food choices that are unhealthy (Blum-Kulka, 1997; McIntosh, 1999), or may guide people into eating behaviors that lead to health risks.

Some research focuses on the contribution of family meals to child development and health, examining physical, psychological, and social outcomes of eating together (Blum-Kulka, 1997; McIntosh, 1999). Eating family dinners is associated with fewer social, educational, and nutritional problems in adolescents (Ackard & Neumark-Sztainer, 2001; Allen, Patterson, & Warren, 1981; Gillman et al., 2000; Neumark-Sztainer et al., 2003; Neumark-Sztainer, Story, Ackerd, Moe, & Perry, 2000a,b). Research on commensality and health in older adults includes mixed findings (Mahajan & Schafer, 1993). Most studies suggest that elderly people who eat alone have unhealthy eating, diet, and nutrition patterns, but other investigations report that those who eat solo are no different, and still others find lone diners healthier (Davis & Randall, 1983; Davis, Murphy, Neuhas, & Lien, 1985; Davis, Randall, Forthofer, Lee, & Marger, 1990; Grotkowski & Sims, 1978; Lee, Templeton, & Wang, 1995; McIntosh & Shifflett, 1984;

McIntosh et al., 1989). One explanation for the diversity of findings is that people in their later years may be so heterogeneous that no overall patterns exist. A gendered perspective suggests that older men who eat alone lack motivation, knowledge, and skills for establishing and maintaining healthy food consumption, leading them to skip meals and consume foods out of convenience rather than health (Donkin et al., 1998).

This was an exploratory study of the prevalence and patterns of commensality that provided preliminary quantitative findings about an under-examined topic where qualitative work has predominated (Dietler & Hayden, 2001; Kemmer et al., 1998a,b; Sobal et al., 2002; Tapper & Tapper, 1986). This investigation assessed commensal units as usual meal partners and commensal circles as frequency of eating at the homes of kin, friends, and neighbors, and did not examine other dimensions of commensal eating. Commensality deserves future investigation, including replication and elaboration of surveys such as this one in other samples and settings, use of other methods to assess commensality, examination of changes and stability in commensality, and examining diet and health outcomes of commensal relationships. While this analysis provides quantitative information about usual commensal patterns, it does not examine frequency of participation in commensal units or the specific type of commensal food events, which range from traditional forms of dinner hospitality (Julier, 2002; Olesen, 1994) to emergent forms such as ‘pot-luck’ dinners (Gusfield, 1995). Many food events have come to be labelled by their commensal patterns, such as family dinners and client luncheons. Further research is needed to more fully examine the form and style of sociability involved in commensal relationships. For example, commensal reciprocity needs to be examined, elucidating the frequency of hosting and being a guest in commensal units and commensal circles. Commensal units and commensal circles for public eating outside the home also need to be examined in further studies.

In conclusion, this investigation found that while most people are commensal eaters much of the time, a substantial amount of eating is done alone. Commensal food consumption varies across meals, with over half eating breakfast alone but few eating dinners by themselves. Most commensal partners are family members. Commensality reveals the social structure of everyday life, where you are who you eat with.

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