



Research report

“Our” food versus “my” food. Investigating the relation between childhood shared food practices and adult prosocial behavior in Belgium



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ABSTRACT

This study focuses on the connection between prosocial behavior, defined as acting in ways that benefit others, and shared meals, defined as meals that consist of food(s) shared with others. In contrast to individual meals, where consumers eat their own food and perhaps take a sample of someone else's dish as a taste, shared meals are essentially about sharing all the food with all individuals. Consequently, these meals create situations where consumers are confronted with issues of fairness and respect. One should not be greedy and consume most of a dish; instead, rules of polite food sharing need to be obeyed. It is therefore proposed that those who have often engaged in shared meals during childhood will have a more prosocial personality, as compared to those who less often took part in shared meals during childhood. To test this hypothesis, data about frequency of shared meals during childhood and altruistic personality in early adulthood were collected using a cross-sectional survey in Belgium ($n = 487$). Results confirm that higher levels of shared meal consumption correspond to higher scores on the self-report altruism scale among students.

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Introduction

From an evolutionary point of view, food and cooperation are closely connected (Kaplan & Gurven, 2005). Studies of hunter-gatherer societies demonstrate that sharing food is associated with principles of cooperation and trust (Allen-Arave, Gurven, & Hill, 2008). In ancestral times, the acquisition of food was unpredictable and food often came in portions that were too large to be consumed within one family. Various theories explaining the sharing of food (Gurven, Hill, Kaplan, Hurtado, & Lyles, 2000; Patton, 2005) suggest that food sharing, and meat sharing in particular, occurs beyond the family, to members of a social network based on reciprocal actions. Accumulating and summarizing all the evidence, Mameli (2013) concluded that especially meat might have made us moral. The sharing of meat resulted in the evolution of a moral system that nowadays sustains human fairness in general. Between families, cooperation is not only a means to acquire food resources, but also a means to celebrate the outcome of such actions. Throughout human evolutionary history, commensality has always been a way to collectively celebrate the benefits of shared food acquisition (Jones, 2008). Focusing on food transfers within families,

evolutionary theories predict that parent–child conflicts may arise over the distribution of food among multiple siblings. As Trivers (1974) explained in his parent–offspring theory, parents want to distribute resources evenly over all of their children, while a child will want more investment than his/her siblings. Thus, while parents may demand an equal distribution of food among all of their children, each child may protest this decision, demanding a bigger share than all other siblings. Today food is still the first, and a very effective, way for parent–offspring conflicts to arise (Seymour, 1983). In sum, if the acquisition, distribution and consumption of food were closely tied to cooperation and morality within and across families throughout human history, one should expect that, even today, food must still be a strong elicitor of cooperative behavior. Indeed, recent studies show that food increases cooperation because of satiation effects; hunger makes people behave less cooperatively (Briers, Pandelaere, Dewitte, & Warlop, 2006; Petersen, Aarøe, Jensen, & Curry, 2013). These studies focused on short-term behavioral effects, and less is known if food consumption may also influence the development of an altruistic personality in the long run. Of course, people are born with (individually different) capacities of empathy and care toward others; works from the field of moral cognitive neuroscience demonstrate a neural, innate, basis of empathy, prosocial behavior and human moral cognition in general (Moll, Zahn, de Oliveira-Souza, Krueger, & Grafman, 2005). Still, apart from this biological predisposition, several theories and research also confirm

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an important place for socialization in the development of prosocial behavior (for an overview see e.g. Hastings, Utendale, & Sullivan, 2007). Food sharing might be one of several acts of socialization that contributes to the development of prosocial behavior. In addition, the abovementioned experimental studies show that the mere consumption of food influences prosocial behavior, and it is not yet known whether the way in which food is consumed also plays a role in this process.

It may be assumed that sharing of food may also contribute to a prosocial effect, as prior works show that people perceive those who do so as being ‘closely connected’ (Alley, 2012; Kniffin & Wansink, 2012; Miller, Rozin, & Fiske, 1998). However, there has seemingly been no research on whether food sharing relates to prosocial behavior in modern societies. This topic is particularly of interest to those working in the fields of social food studies and moral research. Framing it within the context of a growing trend of subjective individualization in affluent societies, Fischler (2011) argued that it is necessary to investigate the connection between prosocial behavior and commensality, defined as eating together. Reviewing emerging trends in moral research, it has been explicitly stated that researchers need to study how morality is being shaped in everyday communication and mealtimes in particular (Saxena & Babu, 2013).

The central goal of this paper is to explore the inherent moral features of shared food in the context of modern, everyday meals, and to determine whether sharing of food is linked to the development of an altruistic personality and prosocial behavior. Prosocial behavior is defined as actions that benefit one or more people other than oneself, thereby including behaviors such as sharing, helping, and cooperating (Batson & Powell, 2003). To meet these goals, a theoretical framework is presented, which explains the link between food sharing, in the context of everyday meals, and the socialization of prosocial behavior during adolescence. This proposal is then tested by means of a cross-sectional study in which the interrelatedness between childhood food sharing practices and adult prosocial behavior is tested among students in Belgium. The paper concludes with suggestions for future research.

Eating together and shared meals

Eating is often a social event that involves active training and embodiment of communicative norms and commensality values (Ochs & Shohet, 2006). Mealtimes are one of the first social occasions at which children are required to learn and express self-control, and are socialized as ‘moral’ human beings (Gallegos, Dziurawiec, Tilbury, & Abernethie, 2006; Ochs & Shohet, 2006; Seymour, 1983). So far, most of the research in this domain has focused on structural variables related to the presence of others at the table. More specifically, considerable attention has been paid to language socialization during mealtimes (Blum-Kulka, 1997; Bossard, 1943; Brumark, 2010). Verbalizations are, for example, used to directly socialize children according to desired norms and standards (Sterponi, 2009), and are often aimed at younger children (Brumark, 2010). Mealtime conversations may often result in parent-child conflicts (Paugh & Izquierdo, 2009), but then again, mealtimes are also occasions to discuss sensitive topics that may spark discussion. Given the presence of food, people can talk about what is on their plate and at any given time “food assessments can produce alternative trajectories of talk and provide for a closing of ‘delicate’ moments” (Mondada, 2009, p. 567).

Next to this verbalized form of socialization, mealtimes also offer an arena for non-verbal training of manners. These “[u]sually take the form of unspoken, almost subconscious guidelines and constraints – a basic substratum or minimum standard which the majority of use carefully observes” (Visser, 1991, p. 341). Non-verbal socialization is less direct and overt. Children and novices

at the table are apprentices who learn through observation and participation with more knowledgeable others (Ochs & Shohet, 2006). Different elements of mealtime habits offer potential for this form of socialization. For example, across communities, mealtime comportment includes rules about order (i.e., who eats before, after, or at the same time as whom) and rules about the social (i.e., fair) distribution of food (Ochs & Shohet, 2006). The presence of others around the table necessitates an order in which food can be served; typically, the order is not random, as guests and older people are commonly served first. In this sense, the order in which food is served signals the prestige and power of those seated around the table (Seymour, 1983), such that patience and obedience are required for those who are served last.

Mealtimes are also an arena for power negotiations (Grieshaber, 1997). Small children, who have little power in general, are part of these negotiations, as rejecting food is one of the first and most effective ways in which they can display their power toward their parents and other adults (Seymour, 1983). The negotiations that emerge become the tools to socially construct the daily rituals of family living and in establishing domestic order (Grieshaber, 1997). Typically, the end of the meal also entails a potential conflict situation where parents might apply rules of obedience. The child might reach satiety before the end of the meal, or the child might resist the food before being satiated (Laurier & Wiggins, 2011; Wiggins & Hepburn, 2007).

For all of the above examples, the *presence of others* around the table is crucial. Mealtimes are arenas for moral socialization because the presence of other people entails rituals and verbalizations that teach novices about polite behavior. However, one aspect of the meal that has remained unmentioned is the actual food that is being consumed. We believe that some, though not all meals, inherently bring forth aspects of morality, and fair play in particular, because of the way in which food is offered and consumed, and not so much because of the presence of other people. We propose that specific foods may have the power to enforce fairness on consumers, perhaps even when there is no one else in close proximity when the food is being eaten.

To investigate this possibility, it is necessary to make the distinction between *eating together* and *shared meals*. Consider two groups, each with four people, having dinner in the same restaurant. Both groups are eating ‘together.’ That is, they are consuming food in the presence of others, which is a structural variable. In the first group all four individuals have ordered their own, personal, favorite dish. They share food experiences in each other’s presence, and some might even take a bite of another person’s food in order to sample the taste of a different dish. In essence, though, these people are not truly sharing their food when compared against the second group. Seated in the same environment, this group ordered several dishes to share. These dishes are placed centrally on their table, and need to be divided into portions for all four people. In this group the meal is genuinely ‘shared,’ which we label as a *shared meal*. Like the first group, the members of this second group eat together, in each other’s presence, and therefore the shared aspect of the meal is not about this structural variable, but the food itself.

Issues such as the division of food are absent when people consume their individual food together. Shared meals need to be divided, preferably into roughly equal portions, and the food needs to be served, which necessitates an order and the power negotiations we described earlier. Indeed, the creation of equal or unequal portions is an inherent and unique feature of shared meals and may occur in the absence of other consumers. Consider, for instance, a family of four living together. A meal has been prepared, yet due to different time schedules it is not possible to consume this meal as a group. The one who prepared the dish eats first, followed by the three others who each eat at different times. Given that this meal is sufficient to satisfy the hunger of all four, yet barely more than

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