



Research report

Contaminated and uncontaminated feeding influence perceived intimacy in mixed-sex dyads[☆]

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ABSTRACT

It was expected that viewers watching adult mixed-sex pairs dining together will give higher ratings of the perceived intimacy and involvement of the pair if feeding is displayed while eating, especially if the feeding involves contaminated (i.e., with potential germ transfer) foods. Our hypotheses were tested using a design in which participants viewed five videotapes in varying order. Each video showed different mixed-sex pairs of actors sharing meal and included a distinct form of food sharing or none. These were shown to 50 small groups of young adults in quasi-random sequences to control for order effects. Immediately after each video, viewers were asked about the attractiveness, attraction and intimacy in the dyad they had just observed. As predicted, videos featuring contaminated feeding consistently produced higher ratings on involvement and attraction than those showing uncontaminated feeding which, in turn, mostly produced higher ratings on involvement and attraction than those showing no feeding behaviors.

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Introduction

Food sharing occurs in many species and takes a variety of forms, with perhaps the most obvious being sharing between parents and dependent children. Food sharing also occurs in adults where it can serve as a mating or bonding behavior, sometimes referred to as “courtship-feeding”. Instances include insects (e.g., Gwynne, 1984) as well as birds (e.g., Nisbet, 1973) and mammals. In general, courtship feeding in these species is a prerequisite to subsequent mating. A more direct variant has been reported in some non-human primates: food being provided in exchange for sex. Food for sex exchange has been reported in both bonobos and common chimpanzees. For instance, Gomes and Boesch (2009) found that wild female chimpanzees copulate more frequently with males who share meat with them over a period of many months.

Food sharing has played an important role in human history and evolution, and is regularly seen in contexts ranging from small informal social gatherings to larger celebratory or religious events (Isaac, 1978; Jones, 2007). There are good reasons for suspecting that food sharing, and particularly feeding, may sometimes be part of human courtship. Parker (1987) goes so far as to suggest that

“nuptial feeding of females” helped drive selection for bipedal locomotion in hominids. Nonetheless, the role of food sharing in intimate relationships in humans has been largely neglected by scholars. Anthropologists have occasionally noted that food sharing may play an important role during human courtship, as emphasized in a rather neglected paper by Parker (1987), but have engaged in “little or no investigation of the motivation and decision-making involved” in human food sharing (Marlowe, 2004, p. 73). Worse yet, in psychology there is “virtually no research on the social meaning of social food transfer” (Miller, Rozin, & Fiske, 1998, p. 425.). This neglect seems quite surprising in light of the important role of resource provision in evolutionary models of human mate selection (e.g., Buss & Schmitt, 1993; Li, Bailey, Kenrick, & Linsenmeier, 2002). In any case, there is limited but substantial and cross-cultural evidence for such an evolutionary perspective on human food sharing. For instance, Kaplan and Hill (1985) reported that women among the hunter-forager Aché prefer the best hunters as their partners in extra-marital affairs. Eibl-Eibesfeldt (1989) reports that mutual feeding in Balinese couples is part of a premarital ritual. Anthropologists also find that prohibitions on acceptable sex or marriage partners often parallel those for food exchange or eating, particularly in the caste societies of South Asia (cf. Liechty, 2005).

Is food sharing an aspect of courtship and mate retention in humans? If so, then food sharing in humans may signal romantic interest or involvement, or be used to maintain and solidify an existing intimate relationship. The significance and impact of food sharing will most certainly vary depending on what kind of sharing occurs. Sharing can take a range of forms, such as tolerated

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scrounging or intentional provisioning. Based on other species, the forms of food sharing most likely to be involved in courtship, are those in which food sharing takes the form of feeding, which may more clearly indicate a willingness to provide caregiving than other forms of food sharing. In addition, sharing may communicate special significance if the shared food is contaminated with the germs of the other person, as when sharing a spoon or eating off of the same small food item. Cases of ‘contaminated’ food sharing have some similarity to mouth-to-mouth kissing in that both reflect a willingness to accept biological ‘contamination’ from the other person. Thus, such food sharing may also reliably indicate a level of intimacy in a relationship. Moreover, such contamination may help protect females from teratogenic effects of Human Cytomegalovirus in relationships that later progress to sexual intimacy (Hendrie & Brewer, 2010). Hence, ‘contaminated’ food sharing may be an indicator of relationships that are advancing towards sexual intimacy.

Some previous research has indicated that social perceptions are indeed modified by food sharing behaviors, although the published evidence is quite limited and partially contradictory. The existing literature consists of just two empirical studies. In the earliest study (Miller et al., 1998), data were collected using either a questionnaire or a videotape. They found that American students saw food sharing, particularly in the form of feeding, as a sign of attraction or intimacy. Moreover, their survey data indicated that when a shared food has had physical contact with the other person prior to being consumed, perceived intimacy and judgments of closeness is enhanced. Impressively, they found differences in reactions to videotapes “approximately 5 minutes in length” differing only in a food exchange lasting “about 10 seconds”. On the other hand, their videotapes featured only one pair of actors, and all food exchanges were shown in both directions (i.e., both man to woman and vice versa); features that may limit the generalizability of their results and leave open the question of whether unilateral feeding has such effects. In addition, due to “internal contradictions”, data from videos showing feeding with “consubstantiation” (similar to our “contamination”) were excluded from analysis and presentation. Hence, their study only provides weaker questionnaire data on the actual impact of such ‘contamination’.

Like Miller et al. (1998), Erwin, Burke, and Purves (2002) showed videos of food sharing and found it to be generally indicative of familiarity. However, in contrast with the earlier study, actually feeding the other person was seen as an indicator of intimacy only in male dyads but not in mixed-sex or female dyads. Unfortunately, Erwin et al. (2002) used an inadequate sample size ($N = 72$) for a study with nine conditions and a between-subjects design. Moreover, it is not clear whether the food “offering” in their video was accepted or if it involved contaminated food, as was the case for feeding (shared fork), so any differences between “offering food” and feeding in their study may have been confounded with perceived contamination or acceptance of the shared food.

Together, these two prior studies provide a provocative but incomplete and inconsistent picture of the effects of viewing feeding on social judgments of relationship status. The present study was designed to provide a clearer understanding of the impact of contaminated and uncontaminated feeding on perceptions of intimacy and involvement in adult mixed-sex dyads. Among the issues left unexamined is the potentially different impression fostered depending on which person is being fed. When feeding occurs, the person providing the food takes a more active role as well as displaying a unidirectional transfer of resources (i.e., food). Hence, it was expected that the providers of food would be seen as more attracted to their dining partner than the recipients. More centrally, it was hypothesized that feeding will produce higher levels of perceived intimacy than no feeding, and feeding of contaminated (i.e., with potential germ transfer) foods will produce higher

levels of perceived intimacy than feeding of non-contaminated foods. Our hypotheses were tested using a within-subjects design in which participants viewed five different mixed-sex pairs of young adult actors, each displaying one distinct behavior in terms of food sharing within a more extended video showing them eating a meal in a restaurant.

Method

Participants

The participants for this study were 118 undergraduate students from a university in the eastern US. There were 43 male participants and 74 female participants ranging in age from 18 to 27 ($M = 19.4$) years. These participants all gave informed consent and were able to receive extra credit in a psychology class in exchange for participating.

Materials

Videos

Five pairs of young adults were videotaped while eating together in a restaurant. Each dyad consisted of two opposite-sex adults of similar age and race. These actors were instructed to just eat “normally” (unscripted), but to avoid acting in ways (e.g., touching) that would indicate to others that they either were or were not romantically involved. Several short segments of video were captured showing each couple while just sharing a meal in this unscripted format. In addition, videos were recorded while they performed each of the following types of food sharing behaviors:

- (1) Feeding with contaminated food: male to female [FC-MF]
- (2) Feeding with contaminated food: female to male [FC-FM]
- (3) Feeding with non-contaminated food: female to male [FNC-FM].
- (4) Feeding with non-contaminated food: male to female [FNC-MF].

Contamination was conveyed by showing the feeder biting off a piece of food that was then immediately offered to the to-be-fed person.

Five test videos were then produced for each dyad, one for each food sharing (feeding in all cases) condition and one with no food sharing, making a total of 25 test videos. Each test video lasted between 33 and 58 ($M = 44.4$) s long. This is sufficient time to present what appears to be a sampling of brief video segments from a meal during which numerous behaviors occur. The unscripted portions of these videos showed a wide range of behaviors including conversations, condiment use, napkin and utensil use, arm and leg movements, postural adjustments, smiling, and of course eating and drinking. Although the pairs in each video were talking during a portion of the recorded periods, all audio was removed from every video. Both members of each dyad were visible in the video at all times. Each video consisted of two brief segments of “normal” (unscripted) eating behavior with one of the four special eating behaviors inserted about midway excepting a control video that consisted of three brief segments of “normal” (unscripted) eating behavior. The cuts between video segments always included a change of perspective (camera position) so that the resulting video would look more natural.

Test booklets

Participants were given a booklet consisting of one page with several questions about personal and demographic variables and

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