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Who eats with family and how often? Household members and work styles influence frequency of family meals in urban Japan

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ABSTRACT

Family commensality, or meals eaten together with family members, is a key practice to understand the socio-cultural organization of eating and family lives. Yet empirical evidence is limited outside of western societies, which have different household structures, work styles, and socio-cultural constructions of the practice. This study examined frequencies of family commensality based on 242 surveys of Japanese adults aged between 20 and 85 in two metropolitan areas. Results showed that family commensality is less frequent not only among those living alone, but also among those living with only non-partners including adult children, parents, and non-family members, than among those living with partners. Full-time employment was associated with late dinner times on weekdays. Later weekday dinner times were strongly associated with reduced frequency of dinners together. Late dinners have become commonplace among full-time workers in postwar Japan, and the peak dinner time in Japan occurs later than in other developed countries. Thus, work and lifestyle constraints impacting schedules appear to influence the frequency of family commensality. Our results suggest that frequencies of family commensality are influenced by co-residents and work styles of participants rather than household sizes. The idea that reduction of household size drives reduction of family commensality may be biased by previous studies conducted in western countries where most people reside in either single or nuclear households. Our study highlights complex determinants of family commensality, beyond presence of other household members, and demonstrates a need for rigorous investigation of family commensality across cultures.

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1. Introduction

Eating is inseparable from human sociality and culture, especially when meals are eaten with others (Fischler, 2011). Eating together with others, i.e. commensality, embodies social and cultural organization of eating, and signifies social cohesions (Giacoman, 2016) and differentiations (Appadurai, 1981; Jarosz, 2017). Although meals are also eaten with friends, work colleagues, and neighbors, the family is one of the primary units of commensal eating that most people eat their main meals with (Sobal & Nelson, 2003). Meals eaten together with family members, i.e. family commensality, have gained considerable attention

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particularly from public health researchers, practitioners, and policy makers, and often are described as “an ideal form of social behavior” (Wilk, 2010) as well as a teaching aid for nutrition education for children and adolescents (Chrzan, 2009). Thus, many studies have focused on commensality with children and adolescents, and reported positive associations between higher frequency of family commensality and healthy diets (Burgess-Champoux, Larson, Neumark-Sztainer, Hannan, & Story, 2009; Gillman et al., 2000) and less likelihood of substance use (Eisenberg, Olson, Neumark-Sztainer, Story, & Bearinger, 2004; J.; White & Halliwell, 2010) and depressive symptoms (Musick & Meier, 2012).

At the same time, there have been debates about whether family commensality and socio-cultural organization of eating have declined and been replaced by eating alone (Murcott, 1997) or whether that is a myth based on “a partial and exaggerated interpretation of evidence” (Jackson, Olive, & Smith, 2009). Several studies have compared nationwide time-use data in different time periods and systematically investigated changes in meal practices

over time in Belgium (Mestdag & Glorieux, 2009), Australia (Venn, Banwell, & Dixon, 2016), Nordic countries (Holm et al., 2016), and the UK (Yates & Warde, 2017). These examined commensality and eating alone at the societal level and included not just those living with family members, but also those living alone. One of the common findings is increased time spent on eating alone and decreased time spent for meals eaten with others, especially with family members, over the years. Most of the studies concluded that the increase in eating alone is fostered by changes in living arrangements including the rise of single-person households and reduction of household sizes (Mestdag & Glorieux, 2009; Venn et al., 2016; Yates & Warde, 2017).

In addition to living arrangements, some qualitative studies have suggested that increased difficulties in coordinating household members' schedules could be another determinant that makes family commensality difficult (Brannen, O'Connell, & Mooney, 2013; Dixon et al., 2014). Lack of synchronicity or coordination of schedules with other people underlies the feeling of being squeezed by time (Southerton, 2006). An interview study reported that many working parents struggle to coordinate not only their meal times but also their children's schedules, food preferences and tastes (Brannen et al., 2013). The perception of time pressure, however, may not have much to do with the rise of dual-income households: comparison of Belgian time-use data in 1966 and 1999 showed that both dual-earner households and single-earner households spent less time for family time and meals over the years, and there were no differences between the two types of households in 1966 and 1999 respectively (Mestdag & Vandeweyer, 2005). This suggests that work styles and amount are not the only contributing factors to reduced family time and meals. Furthermore, the rise of flexible employment and wider variability in individual schedules also made it difficult to synchronize schedules with those of significant others (Dixon et al., 2014). Thus, work styles as well as time schedules of household members may influence whether families eat together.

This study aims to expand the existing literature on family commensality by examining the practice in urban Japan, which offers an interesting case study of family commensality for three reasons. First, it provides a wider range of household types than previous studies. Most previous studies were conducted in western developed countries where the majority of participants were from either single or nuclear households (households are defined as being comprised of a single family nucleus such as married couples with/without unmarried children and single-parent households) (OECD, 2001). Analyses in such countries have focused on differences between single-person households and nuclear households. Similar to other developed countries, Japan has experienced a significant increase in single-person households over the last 30 years, with the single-person household comprising more than one third of total Japanese households in 2015 (Statistics Bureau of Japan, 2017b). At the same time, households other than single-person and nuclear households comprise 16% of total households in Japan (Statistics Bureau of Japan, 2016), which is relatively high among high-income developed countries (OECD, 2016). Multigenerational extended households constitute one example and they typically include married couples, one of their parents, and their children (Morgan & Hiroshima, 1983). Furthermore, as in other countries, there are growing numbers of households with parents and unmarried adult children in Japan, though multigenerational households are often classified as nuclear households in population census (Statistics Bureau of Japan, 2016). In 2016, more unmarried adult children lived with their parents compared to 1980: the proportion increased from 29.5% to 45.8% among young adults aged 20–34 and from 2.2% to 16.3% among middle-age adults aged 35–44 (Nishi, 2017). The situations of such households, which are

also observed in western and non-western societies, have not been examined in previous studies, which have focused on single and nuclear households. Thus, understanding the situations of extended households as well as the factors influencing family commensality in an eastern developed society will expand our current knowledge of family commensality.

Secondly, despite the social and cultural significance of commensal eating (Fischler, 2011), cultural variations in family commensality, including its development and implementation, have not received much attention in academic research. Most previous studies treated the practice as if family commensality of nuclear households was a universal human tradition (Wilk, 2010). Adoption of family commensality in many societies is juxtaposed with the spread of middle-class nuclear households relying on women's unpaid labor at home (Ishige, 2005; Omote, 2010), along with the country's economic growth (Greif, 2006). Middle-class in postwar Japan generally refers to white-collar male employees of large companies and public enterprises and their families (Vogel, 2013), particularly with full-time housewives. Gendered division of labor in the Japanese nuclear households is more notable than among western counterparts: housewives manage the home and husbands devote themselves to their employers (M. I. White, 2002). Gender divisions grew larger compared to when many Japanese women worked in farming and house business (Brinton & Ngo, 1993). Long working hours and job transfers (*tanshin funin*) of male breadwinners often result in fathers being absent from family activities at home including family commensality. Thus, lack of synchronicity of household members' schedules may occur even among single-earner households.

Lastly, increasing the frequency of family commensality has been part of the agenda in Japan's public health policy for over a decade. The *Shokuiku* (food and nutrition education) Basic Law enacted in 2005 describes commensality, or sharing meals (*kyō shoku*), as a foundation of food and nutrition education, and in 2011 the government set targets to increase frequencies of breakfasts and dinners eaten together with family members to 10 times per week between 2011 and 2015 (Cabinet Office, 2011). In 2016, the target was increased to 11 times per week (Cabinet Office, 2016a). Government surveys conducted annually since 2005 (Cabinet Office, 2016b; MAFF, 2017) focus on reporting the proportion of the Japanese population eating breakfast and dinner together with family regardless of living arrangements and work styles of the population. Thus, despite a policy emphasis on family commensality, understanding of the practice, especially the social and cultural contexts influencing its prevalence, is limited.

According to Takimoto and colleagues' review of family meal studies in English and Japanese (2015), definitions and measures of "family meals" or meals eaten together with family members varied by studies: some focused on the number of family meals per week and others examined the number of days eaten with family members. Most studies they reviewed focused on children and adolescents. Thus, there are no common definitions or measures which encompass all the complex structures of family commensality, and it is imperative to examine the practice using multiple measures, rather than narrowing the scope of the practice.

We examine determinants of family commensality among Japanese adults in two urban metropolitan areas. Although not a nationally representative sample, our survey provides detailed information about individual participants and their household members in urban Japan, because our data collection was conducted through face-to-face interviews. Tumin and Anderson (2015) pointed out that the absence of detailed information about household structures may limit comparison between different household types. In addition, most of the previous large-sample studies sampled one or two days for each participant using time

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