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Interaction as the foundation for eating practices in shared mealtimes

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ABSTRACT

Mealtimes shared with other people define how, what, how much, and with whom we eat. On such occasions, whether in private or public spaces, and as formal or informal events, our eating practices are inseparable from our interactions with other people. In this Editorial for the Special Issue on *Interactional approaches to eating together and shared mealtimes*, we provide an overview of the interdisciplinary field of research on eating together and shared mealtimes to illustrate the breadth and depth of work that has been developed in this area to date. The overview is divided into three broad clusters of research that focus primarily on (1) cultural or societal aspects, (2) individual outcomes, or (3) interactional practices. Commonalities across these clusters are discussed, the need for more research across a greater global and cultural diversity of eating practices is highlighted, and the potential for interdisciplinary collaboration on research on eating together and shared mealtimes across diverse scientific disciplines is explored. The papers in this Special Issue showcase a sample of contemporary work from within the cluster of research on interactional practices, and a brief overview of these papers is discussed. Finally, it is argued that as a common area of interest, social interaction as the foundation of eating practices within shared mealtimes poses considerable potential for interdisciplinary collaboration across scientific disciplines, and between scientists, professionals, and participants from the study populations.

1. Introduction

Eating with other people is for many of us a daily occurrence and a central part of our food practices. Whether in our homes, in schools and offices, or in cafés and restaurants, eating together defines both mundane as well as celebration mealtimes. As children, eating with others is typically the default: until adolescence, we spend almost all of our mealtimes with other people. For much of the time, therefore, the shared mealtime is the foundation of our eating practices. It defines how, what, how much, and with whom we eat. Eating practices are, in many instances, inseparable from interactions with other people. As such a foundational and ubiquitous element, it is the interactional features of eating practices that we wish to highlight in this paper.

Research on eating together and shared mealtimes is a rich landscape that has developed over several decades with a considerable interdisciplinary span including research within anthropology, ethnomethodology, linguistics, psychology, and sociology. To date, however, the field has typically been fragmented across disciplinary boundaries (Larson et al., 2006). Despite many researchers being interested in core issues – what, why, how, and how much people eat – developments in one disciplinary area may not always be recognised in another. The aims of this Special Issue on *Interactional approaches to eating together and shared mealtimes* are therefore threefold. First, we wish to draw scholarly attention to eating together not simply as a separate variable or factor but as an underpinning foundation within which other concepts, such as food choice, can be examined. Second, to highlight overlapping areas of interest across disciplines, thus encouraging interdisciplinary collaboration that can enable us to tackle more complex issues related to eating. Finally, to showcase a sample of research that is at the forefront of work that uses an interactional approach to eating and mealtime practices, to illustrate some of the latest findings and to stimulate the further development of this field.

This paper, as the Editorial to the Special Issue, will address the first two aims through providing a brief overview of research in the field of eating together and shared mealtimes. The field can be divided into three clusters, according to whether they are examined in terms of societal and cultural practices, individual outcomes, or interactional dynamics. Each of these clusters of research are briefly described in the

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next three sections. We use the generic term 'mealtime(s)' to refer to any occasions in which at least two people are together in a shared interactional space, and when at least one of them is eating, whether in domestic, institutional, or public settings. This includes, for instance, family mealtimes with at least one parent and child, children in school canteens, people in restaurants, or when one caregiver is assisting another person to eat. In some fields, eating together or sharing a mealtime is referred to by the term 'commensality' (Sobal, 2000), though there are variations regarding what is included in this term (e.g., Jönsson et al., 2021). While this might typically involve sitting down together at a table to eat, for instance, in other situations, 'eating together' might include someone eating a snack at a food-truck or street market, or eating ice-cream together on a beach. The word 'mealtime' thus itself can be too prescriptive a term for situations in which people eat together on a more informal basis.

2. Mealtimes as cultural and societal practices

The first cluster of research is concerned with how mealtimes have been studied in terms of their status as cultural and/or societal practices and it is within this area that the term commensality is most widely used. There is an enormous span of research in this area, located primarily within the disciplines of anthropology and sociology, and here we highlight two main areas of research that have been particularly productive in this area: the form and frequencies of mealtimes, and the daily work that goes into the making of mealtimes.

2.1. Forms and frequency of mealtimes

Two of the most basic research questions about mealtimes–regarding their form and frequency–have been the focus for much of the classic and contemporary research in this area. Research has used a range of survey methods, interviews, food diaries, and census records to ascertain patterns across large populations as well as identifying details about specific aspects of eating together. This research stretches back to Mary Douglas' (2017, originally from 1972) work on the structure of the meal, as well as Georg Simmel's (1910/1994) work on the mealtime as a site in which the individual and the cultural collide (Simmel & Symons, 1994). A key feature of Douglas' work, for example, was to demonstrate the patterns inherent in meals: in how different courses are structured and how these patterns repeat over time. The structure of meals also defines what is acceptable and normative for everyday meals versus special occasions (see also Douglas & Nicod, 1974): that we might invite friends for an evening meal, for instance, but only offer strangers something to drink.

Work on family mealtimes, in particular, has made considerable progress in terms of identifying the forms and frequency of eating together. Some of the classic work in this field focused on expectations of what constitutes a 'proper meal', including interviews with mothers in England and Wales on their mealtime expectations and the gendered division of labour that goes into meal provision (Charles & Kerr, 1988; Murcott, 1982). Since the early work in this area, research has begun to chart more of the diversity of the form of family meals across the globe. In Norway, for instance, Bugge and Almås (2006) have shown how notions of what constitutes a 'proper meal' are becoming more nuanced as changing cultural conventions shape everyday eating practices, while Holm and Lund (2019) relatedly show evidence of men becoming more involved in meal preparation even if mealtimes themselves have become shorter in duration due to other family commitments. Research has also investigated forms of mealtimes in, for example, Australia (Fraser et al., 2022), Kenya (Brückner & Caglar, 2016), and sub-artic regions of Canada and Finland (Jarvenpa, 2008). Through gaining information about what mealtimes look like in different cultures we can also examine different mealtime practices, such as whether all family members eat at the same time (Riley, 2016) or whether there might be there an expectation that family members should talk with each other during mealtimes (e.g., Hellman, 2008; Meneley, 2011).

Regardless of their form or frequency, the high status and moral value awarded to family mealtimes and eating together is a recurrent theme across the academic literature such as in Australia (Lupton, 2000), the US (DeVault, 1991), and the UK (Charles & Kerr, 1988). As will also be discussed in Section 3, there is a widespread assumption that shared mealtimes are overwhelmingly positive and have value and benefits for society and individuals (e.g. Fischler, 2011). The importance of eating together has even been argued to be so much a cornerstone of human culture that eating alone is typically considered negatively or shameful in many societies (Fischler, 2011), despite the rising numbers of adults living alone (e.g., Statistics Netherlands, 2024; Choi & Ramaj, 2024a; 2024b; Sandström & Karlsson, 2019), which may have implications for how common perceptions and values associated with eating together will develop. Nonetheless, it is within the context of high status and moral value awarded to family mealtimes that there lies a concern with the apparent decline in the frequency of shared mealtimes or the so-called 'destructuration' of the meal (Mestdag, 2005; Warde & Yates, 2017). For decades, researchers have been concerned with what is considered to be an increase in the individualisation of eating with more people eating snacks and 'grazing' (Fischler, 1980, 2015), eating outside of the home (Warde & Martens, 2000), a rise in fast food outlets (Ritzer, 2000) and thus a reduction in more formal, shared meals in which people eat together around a table.

The research consistently demonstrates, however, that not only is it hard to find evidence that shared mealtimes or a defined 'family meal' was actually prevalent in particular ways in previous generations (e.g. Murcott, 1997, 2012) but also that current empirical evidence is too divergent to make any strong conclusions about this (Murcott, 2019). For instance, research varies in terms of which meals are recorded (e.g., breakfast or dinner), who is eating together, and what kind of food is served. It has furthermore been argued that research in this area has often begun with the assumption that family mealtimes are beneficial and then sought to prove this (Wilk, 2010). As Wilk (2010) notes, "on survey form, a meal where everyone shares jokes and tells stories is the same as one where everyone stares at their plate bolting food silently under the glare of an angry father." (p. 432). This has particular resonance for research on individual outcomes of shared mealtimes (Section 3), where associations between parenting styles and mealtime atmosphere, and children's eating practices are discussed. Moreover, most of the research in this area originates from middle class families in the US and Europe and is therefore skewed toward certain regions and populations of the world. In other cultures, people do not necessarily eat in family groups but might instead eat together according to age or gender (e.g. Riley & Paugh, 2018).

2.2. Making a meal

The second main area of research focused on cultural and/or societal aspects of mealtimes has explored the various processes that lie behind mealtimes themselves, from the frequently gendered division of domestic labour of the purchase and preparation of food, to the 'food work' that allows us to experience eating together *as a* shared event. In short, research has begun to unpack the ways in which meals, as cultural and societal practices, are made. As with other research in this cluster, studies reach back to the 1970s and much of it is based on family meals rather than other constellations of eating together.

Some of the earliest research on the work behind family mealtimes was conducted in France (Delphy, 1980), Wales (Murcott, 1982), England (Charles & Kerr, 1988), Sweden (Ekström, 1991), and the US (DeVault, 1991). This work raised the profile of domestic labour in relation to food provision, demonstrating the various cognitive, behavioural, and emotional aspects of providing food for the family. The prominent role of women in making meals can be traced not only through the ways in which women were often the ones planning meals, purchasing and then preparing food, but also through women

simultaneously ensuring that meals matched the food preferences of family members (Charles & Kerr, 1988; Murcott, 1995). Moreover, women were often eating less food than other family members and ensuring that their husbands and children received the 'better' parts of the meal. As Charles and Kerr noted, therefore, "Meals can be seen as symbolising the important social relations of power and subordination that exist within the family." (1988: p. 17). Using a mixture of interviews, food diaries, and surveys, this work also provided empirical evidence for earlier theories (e.g., Douglas, 2017): that meals are *produced* through a framework of cultural and social practices, that they require work to be experienced *as* a certain type of meal (DeVault, 1991).

While the work of the 1980s and 1990s was dominated by a focus on women's role in family mealtimes, more contemporary research has begun to trace variations in shared meals across different households (e.g. Cappellini et al., 2016). Work includes, for instance, how young couples learn to eat together as they transition to living together (Kremmer et al., 1998; Marshall & Anderson, 2002) or how older adults socialise in lunch clubs and do not necessarily treat eating alone as being a poor-substitute for a shared meal (Thomas & Emond, 2017; Fischler, 2011). Research has also examined the complexity of contemporary life and its impact on shared mealtimes, such as how coordinating a family mealtime involves the synchronisation of the schedules of all family members (Middleton et al., 2022).

2.3. Summary

Some of the key findings from work in this area are the importance of eating together and shared mealtimes as a basic unit in society, and one that holds enormous significance for many cultures, regardless of the form or frequency that meals take. Who we eat with, how we eat, and the work that goes into preparing meals is a vital part of our understanding of food as part of our social lives. Moreover, mealtimes are not simply events that happen to exist, but rather, they require work to be experienced *as* a mealtime event.

3. Individual outcomes of shared mealtimes and eating together

The second cluster of research examines the study of shared mealtimes and eating together in terms of psychosocial, behavioural, and health outcomes for the individual. Much research in this cluster is situated within the discipline of psychology or nutrition science, typically examining associations or causal relationships between mealtime characteristics, psychological concepts, behavioural factors, and individual psychosocial, behavioural and/or health outcomes.

3.1. Benefits of mealtimes for psychosocial, behavioural, and health outcomes

A large body of work concerns psychosocial, behavioural, and health outcomes as a function of (family) mealtime characteristics. These typically include mealtime frequency (in this context, that means the frequency of eating together as a family), location (e.g., at home or eating out; in the kitchen or dining room; in front of the television, or elsewhere), duration of the mealtime, and household composition (e.g., single- or dual-parent families or otherwise). Frequently studied behavioural and health outcomes include food and drinks intake, dietary quality, weight status, and mental health and well-being (Snuggs & Harvey, 2023). Studies in this area typically take a quantitative research approach with a cross-sectional or longitudinal design and use self-report measures such as survey questionnaires to assess the relevant concepts and behaviours.

As an illustration of research in this area, a longitudinal study that distributed survey questionnaires among adolescents found that family meal frequency at the age of twelve was associated with a lower risk of substance use at the age of seventeen for girls (Eisenberg et al., 2008). Using a cross-sectional design, another survey study among adults and adolescents found associations between family meal frequency and higher intake of fruits and vegetables in adults and consumption of sugar-sweetened beverages and sweets in adolescents, with the latter associations were partially mediated by perceived family cohesion (Welsh et al., 2011). Furthermore, a longitudinal survey study suggested a protective effect of family mealtimes against problematic eating behaviours in adolescents, as a higher family mealtime frequency was associated with a lower prevalence of excessive weight control behaviours (Neumark-Sztainer et al., 2008). A recent systematic umbrella review synthesized 41 review articles on psychosocial and behavioural outcomes of mealtime characteristics and concluded that a positive attitude predicted more frequent family meals, and that a higher frequency of family meals was associated with a lower risk of poor mental health and well-being, poor dietary and risk behaviours, obesity, and poor academic outcomes in children and adolescents (Snuggs & Harvey, 2023).

3.2. Social influences on eating and mealtime behaviours

Another focus of work in this area is on how eating behaviours are influenced by other people present during the mealtime. Perceived social norms, for instance, provide an indication of what and how much others eat, and 'should' be eaten in a given context; which, in turn, influences perceptions of 'appropriate' eating behaviour (Catellani & Carfora, 2023; Higgs, 2015). A related predictor of eating behaviour is modelling (Cruwys et al., 2015; Higgs, 2015), the process of learning by observing others (Bandura & Walters, 1977), which in the context of eating together means that individuals adapt their eating practices to those of the person(s) they are eating with (Cruwys et al., 2015).

Social influences of many variations are particularly relevant and frequently studied in the field of shared mealtimes and eating together. During family meals, parents function as role models for children, and studies have shown modelling effects of parents and caregivers as well as siblings and peers on children's food intake and mealtime behaviours (Addessi et al., 2005; Blissett, 2018; Palfreyman et al., 2015; Salvy et al., 2008). In preschool settings, research has shown how adults (Galloway et al., 2006; Hendy 1999) or peers (Hendy & Raudenbush, 2000; Lumeng & Hillman, 2007) can influence young children to eat certain foods or certain amounts of food during shared meals in preschools. In addition to food intake and mealtime behaviours as outcomes, a major body of work examines children's psychosocial, behavioural and health outcomes as a function of parent and child behaviours during mealtimes, such as parenting strategies and feeding styles. Wardle et al. (2002) developed the Parental Feeding Style Questionnaire for this purpose, which has been widely used since then (see, for instance, literature reviews by Norton et al. (2023) and Schratz et al. (2023)). Important findings in this area include that children of parents who adopt a responsive feeding style, i.e., parents respond adequately and developmentally appropriate to children's cues of hunger and satiety, have a healthier weight gain trajectory than children of parents who act less responsively to children's hunger and satiety cues (Redsell et al., 2021).

Social influence studies that centre around parent and child behaviours regularly deploy a quantitative approach with an experimental, longitudinal or cross-sectional design, and survey questionnaires as the data collection method (e.g., Ayre et al., 2024; Kininmonth et al., 2023; Qiu et al., 2023; Vollmer, 2019). Observational designs in which empirical data comprise video recordings of family meals are also fairly common (e.g., Moding & Fries, 2020; Penilla et al., 2022; Powell et al., 2017), or a combination of both (e.g., Pesch et al., 2020; Powell et al., 2017). In observational designs, the analytical approach typically entails the coding of observed, a priori determined behaviours. Subsequently, codes may be analyzed in descriptive terms, or quantified and included in statistical analyses to identify associations with psychosocial, behavioural or health outcomes. For instance, in a study using video recordings of families' breakfasts, lunches, dinners, and snacks, parent

and child behaviours and prompts were coded and quantitative analyses showed that parental behaviour was associated with different eating occasions (Moding & Fries, 2020). In a cross-sectional study using questionnaires, parents of siblings reported on their own feeding practices and their children's eating behaviours, and associations between feeding practices and specific eating behaviours of children, such as fussy eating, were identified (Ayre et al., 2024). Using a combination of questionnaires, interviews, and coded observations of behaviours during video recorded family meals, Pesch et al. (2020) concluded that particular feeding styles were associated with mothers' beliefs about their child's weight status (such as that the child was too thin or was eating too much), reported feeding behaviours (such as pressuring to eat or restrict eating), and with mothers' observed behaviours during mealtimes (such as bribery). Finally, in a randomized clinical trial involving mother-newborn dyads, it was shown that newborns of mothers who received an intervention on responsive parenting practices gained weight more slowly and were less likely to be overweight at the age of one, as compared to newborns of mothers in a control condition (Savage et al., 2016).

Beyond research on associations between parent and child behaviours and specific outcomes, a comprehensive review of (mostly qualitative) literature on healthy eating beliefs and the meaning of food identified additional social influences in the context of eating together and mealtime practices (Van der Heijden et al., 2021). For instance, considering food preferences and specific food requests of partners and children when preparing food was considered as a way to strengthen family relationships by mothers preparing the meals, which influenced their decisions on what foods will be served during the meal, despite deviant personal preferences (Teuscher et al., 2015). Eating together as a means of bonding with others also prevails beyond the family context, as this is also common among friends (Lems et al., 2020).

In sum, work on individual outcomes of shared mealtimes and eating together deploys a variety of theoretical and methodological perspectives and typically includes behavioural outcomes such as what and how much is eaten in the short and long term, health outcomes such as weight status, and psychological outcomes such as well-being. Furthermore, this body of work also addresses how people–in many studies involving parents and children–influence each other's eating practices, and matters such as perceived relationships with others that are reinforced by eating together.

3.3. Individual experiences of mealtimes

Whereas research on individual outcomes discussed so far engages in measuring behaviours, health outcomes and/or psychological concepts, another body of research aims to identify individual experiences, beliefs and perceptions regarding mealtimes and eating together. Experiences, beliefs and perceptions are argued to *shape* measurable psychological concepts that can lead to behavioural outcomes (see, e.g., Catellani and Carfora (2023), Conner and Armitage (2006), Leng et al. (2017), and Olsen (1999), for overviews and examples of psychological and behavioural models and theories and the shaping role of beliefs). Research of this kind has to date typically adopted a qualitative research design, such as ethnography, phenomenology, or grounded theory, with interviews, focus group discussions and participatory action methods being common methods for data collection.

A recent scoping review of literature on young children's eating and mealtime practices in early childhood education and care identified a core body of literature on teacher's perspectives on the mealtime environment (Willemsen et al., 2023). The synthesis showed that teachers perceive mealtimes not only as a site for nutritional education or managing eating practices, but also as an environment in which children learn what and how they should eat. The socialisation of children into eating practices, including those involving motor and social skills like using utensils and sitting with other children and teachers, is thus an important part of shared mealtimes in institutional settings (Willemsen et al., 2023) (see also section 4.1 below).

In the context of family meals, health, modelling, providing structure, communication, and socializing provide motivations for parents to organize family mealtimes, as concluded in a recent umbrella review on parents' experiences of family mealtimes (Snuggs & Harvey, 2023). Furthermore, a synthesis of qualitative literature on healthy eating beliefs and the meaning of food in populations with a low socioeconomic position showed that particular foods and specific mealtime behaviours are perceived and used as ways to express identities, such as being a good, moral person, a masculine man, or a competent parent (Van der Heijden et al., 2021). To illustrate the latter, qualitative work involving interviews with parents showed that parents valued eating healthily in the presence of children in order to be a good role model (e.g., Dalma et al., 2016). In addition, indulging children's requests for foods fuelled parents' perception of being a good caregiver (e.g., Fielding-Singh, 2017). Moreover, healthy eating was perceived as morally superior to unhealthy eating among adolescents from various socioeconomic backgrounds (Fielding-Singh, 2019).

3.4. Summary

Work on individual outcomes of shared mealtimes and eating together has typically identified associations or causal relationships between mealtime characteristics, psychological concepts, behavioural factors, and individual psychosocial, behavioural and/or health outcomes. There is a large body of work on social influence, i.e., how people influence each other's eating practices. Parental behaviours during mealtimes and associated outcomes in children comprise a considerable part of this work. Furthermore, another branch of research focuses on parents' and caregivers' experiences and perceptions of shared mealtimes and eating together.

4. Interactional practices of eating together and shared mealtimes

The third cluster of research on eating together and shared mealtimes focuses almost exclusively on what happens *during* mealtimes, with a particular focus on language and social interaction between those present. Research within this area is spread across different disciplines, including ethnomethodology, linguistic anthropology, and social psychology. In contrast to research within the previous two clusters, therefore, it does not treat 'environment' or 'social influence' as a separable factor but rather an integral part of how people eat together. Research typically conducted (micro-)analyses of language and social interaction captured in observations (e.g., video recordings) of shared mealtimes, originating from qualitative ethnomethodological and discourse analysis designs (e.g., Hepburn & Potter, 2011; Paugh, 2005; Wiggins, 2014). It is within this cluster of research that the papers included in this Special Issue are most clearly located. Two main areas of work can be considered as focusing on issues of socialisation and dinnertime dynamics, and sensory practices during eating.

4.1. Socialisation and dinnertime dynamics

Eating together, particularly when young children are involved, has long been considered an important arena for socialisation into cultural and societal values around food (e.g. Ochs et al., 1996; Paugh, 2005), including how children learn 'table manners' (e.g., Blum-Kulka, 1990) as well as issues associated with morality (e.g. Galatolo & Caronia, 2018; Sterponi, 2009). This body of work has demonstrated how children learn what it is to eat according to the culture, in terms of what is eaten, how it is eaten, and how to talk about food (e.g. Kremer-Sadlik & Morgenstern, 2022; Kremer-Sadlik et al., 2015; see also Willemsen et al., 2023). Some of this work focuses specifically on cultural aspects of eating (see Section 2), such as how children are socialised into what it means to eat as an Italian or American family (Ochs et al., 1996; Ochs & Shohet, 2006).

This can include how children might be socialised into moral behaviours when they deviate from a rule (e.g. 'don't say it's disgusting!') or to eat in a certain way (De Geer et al., 2002; 2004). Work has also examined how activities such as playing with food, often treated negatively, can sometimes be beneficial and conducive to eating in families (Zotevska & Martín-Bylund, 2022) and preschool lunches (Wiggins et al., 2023).

Whereas interactional research that examines the mainly unidirectional process of socialisation, in which children learn norms or rules that are set by parents and societal expectations, related research examines interaction as a multidirectional process involving dynamics between people at the dinner table. Again, this research is almost primarily located within the specific area of family mealtimes, since it is here that there are "tensions between parental authority and individual agency" (Paugh & Izquierdo, 2009, p.199). Any researcher or parent knows the challenges faced when trying to encourage children to try new foods. Research on family meals has therefore examined the various discursive practices that are used by parents in these negotiations, and how children themselves respond. These can vary from direct requests ('directives') such as 'eat your dinner!' (Craven & Potter, 2010; Kent, 2012) to admonishments for transgressions such as burping or spitting (Hepburn, 2020; Hepburn & Mandelbaum, 2018) to threats such as 'if you don't eat this, you won't get that' (Hepburn & Potter, 2011).

A focus on dynamics provides more details in terms of not just what is said, but also the implications of the interaction. In preschool settings, teachers' practices have included pressuring children to eat (e.g., Swindle et al., 2017) or encouraging children and using positive modelling behaviour (e.g., Fallon et al., 2018; Gable & Lutz, 2001). What is important here, however, is how behaviours are coded in different ways: the phrase 'eat up!', for instance, could be interpreted as either pressure or encouragement. Children's responses are also crucial if we are to understand how adult behaviour is to be interpreted and understood. For instance, while parents might demand certain types of behaviour from children, children can comply in a nonverbal way that nevertheless works as if their behaviour was entirely self-motivated (Kent, 2012). An association between one person's (verbal) behaviour and other person's (nonverbal) behaviour are therefore not always straightforward. Similarly, in preschool meals, Dotson et al. (2015) demonstrated how children might feign compliance to teachers' requests to eat by simply moving food around the plate.

4.2. Sensory (and psychological) practices

The second main area of research that examines the details of interaction during mealtimes has been focused on sensory practices and psychological concepts related to food and eating. These might be regarded as some of the foundational aspects of eating (how we individually respond to food, for instance), since it covers issues from food preferences to satiety and taste. Surprisingly, however, there has been relatively little work on how sensory aspects of food are handled in mealtime settings. Most research on the senses is conducted within laboratories or in quasi-experimental settings, and most mealtime research is concerned with other issues as discussed in the previous sections. It is as if the food itself has been almost entirely absent from research on mealtimes (Mondada, 2021).

While work in this area has a relatively recent history, it already shows promising findings. The much-researched topic of food preferences (also referred to as 'liking' and 'disliking' food) has been examined from a discursive psychological perspective to consider how these concepts become interactionally consequential during, for instance, family mealtimes (Wiggins, 2004; Wiggins & Potter, 2003; Wiggins et al., 2001). More recent work has then examined how parents often disregard or challenge children's claims about liked or disliked food (Van der Heijden et al., 2022, 2023; Wiggins, 2014), even with pre-verbal infants (Wiggins, 2023), thus picking up some of the issues around dynamics (section 4.1) with a focus on sensory or psychological matters. Other psychological topics that have been considered in family meals include satiety (Laurier & Wiggins, 2011) and disgust expressed by children (Wiggins, 2013; 2014b) or adults (Wiggins & Keevallik, 2023).

The processes of eating have also been examined in detail, such as how parents and young infants learn to co-ordinate and synchronise their bodies and utensils over time (Costantini et al., 2018; Negayama, 1993; Parkinson & Drewett, 2001; van Dijk et al., 2009, 2018; Young & Drewett, 2000). For instance, parents often open their mouth immediately after infants open theirs, in a closely timed manner that suggests bodies are as important as words during mealtimes (Vacaru et al., 2022). Similarly, parents have also been found to use lip-smacks to encourage their infants to open and close their mouths in a chewing movement (Wiggins & Keevallik, 2021b) and to utter gustatory mmms in synchrony with infants' own eating practices (Wiggins, 2019; Wiggins & Keevallik, 2021a).

In other settings involving adults, sensory practices have focused on tasting (as a practice) rather than taste (as a sense) and found regularities in how tasting is achieved over various contexts such as at a food market (Mondada, 2022), in shops (Mondada, 2018), or in tasting workshops (Liberman, 2013; Mondada, 2023, 2024). For instance, while tasting might involve multiple senses such as sniffing (Mondada, 2020) and taking a mouthful of food (Mondada, 2018), these seemingly individual behaviours are sequentially organised within the interaction involving other people and the food itself. People will often avert their eye-gaze, for instance, precisely when food is put in the mouth to be tasted before an assessment is produced, directed at another person in the interactional framework (Mondada, 2022). By focusing on the details of verbal and non-verbal interaction, and using video data from real-life mealtimes, research in this area is therefore beginning to explicate aspects of eating practices that have previously been overlooked due to theoretical or methodological constraints.

4.3. Summary

In sum, work on interactional practices focuses mostly on what happens *during* mealtimes, with a particular focus on embodied and discursive features of how people interact with one another while they are eating. Work in this area has focused on how children are socialised into 'appropriate' food and eating practices; multidirectional interactional dynamics between people at the dinner table, involving a variety of conversational topics and analytical foci; and the interactional construction of sensory practices and psychological concepts related to food and eating.

5. Interdisciplinary commonalities across the three research clusters

Although the three clusters of research differ considerably regarding their theoretical perspectives and methodological frameworks, there are commonalities of interest across disciplines. The first of which is something that is central to this paper: the importance of social interaction. Evidence from all three clusters demonstrates that what, when, how much, and with whom we eat are inextricably intertwined with our interactions with other people. The details of this phenomenon may differ across clusters, in terms of, for instance, how sociological and cultural processes shape our eating practices (e.g., Bugge & Almås, 2006), how people can influence others' eating behaviour (e.g., Catellani & Carfora, 2023), or how specific aspects of eating are collaboratively co-constructed in interaction (e.g., Van der Heijden et al., 2022). Some research focuses more on the individual, therefore, while others focus more on social factors or on the integration of the two. In some research, the topic of interaction might be termed 'mealtime atmosphere', mealtime dynamics, social influence, or social interaction: what is at its core, however, is how people's presence, use of language, and embodied practices (including eye gaze, gestures, and so on) are important for understanding individual eating behaviours.

A second commonality is that shared mealtimes are treated almost

unequivocally as positively valued events that are beneficial not only for the individual but also at social and cultural levels. While there are some exceptions, such as the potential harm to mental or physical health depending on how people might be influenced or coerced by others when eating together, or caregivers exerting negative influence on children's eating behaviour (e.g., Schratz et al., 2023), the assumption tends toward the claim that shared mealtimes (and specifically, family mealtimes) are important for the individual and society. That is, that eating together and shared mealtimes have positive outcomes for the individual (e.g., regarding physical and mental health) as well as for society (e.g., stronger family bonds). This assumption and the research evidence that supports it, does, however, leave questions for those who cannot or do not want to eat with others. Research on eating alone (e.g., Lee et al., 2020; Takeda & Melby, 2017) or eating alone in comparison to eating with others (Hetherington et al., 2006) raises issues about the impact of this factor for health as well as social outcomes: it is not always so straightforward, as these studies demonstrate. There is a need, therefore, for further research that avoids stigmatising solo eating situations while also developing more detailed understanding of the various outcomes of shared mealtimes that goes beyond a view of them as only positively laden events.

This brings us to a third commonality, which relates to the types of shared mealtimes and situations that have been studied. To date, there has been an overwhelming focus on family mealtimes, and specifically the role of women and children in these settings. In the research clusters on shared mealtimes as cultural or societal practices and individual outcomes, research has investigated the form and frequency of family meals as well as the impact of these on child physical and mental health outcomes. Research across the clusters of cultural or social and interactional practices also examples how children are socialised into culturally or socially 'appropriate' ways of eating. In the interactional research cluster, further detail is added through examinations of how children and parents talk during family meals and how food and table manners are negotiated. The role of women in mealtimes, as food providers and caregivers, has also received substantial attention in both the cultural/social and individual clusters. The disproportional focus on women and children, at the expense of men (or nonbinary participants) has been noted in several literature reviews (Rahill et al., 2020; Snuggs & Harvey, 2023; Van der Heijden et al., 2021; Willemsen et al., 2023). As such, insights from research on eating together and mealtimes is likely biased towards associations, experiences, beliefs and interactional dynamics of women/mothers. Moreover, studying predominantly women/mothers might perpetuate an assumption – among researchers and in society more broadly – that mealtimes are mainly 'a woman's concern'. However, fathers have an increasing role within the goings-on of the family, and 'traditional' gender roles are fading as women spend more time in employment, and fathers' responsibility in family activities increases (Rahill et al., 2020). The bias toward certain participants is further skewed by a predominance of studies that are conducted with participants from Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich and Democratic (WEIRD) populations, as is a common bias in, amongst others, psychological research (see e.g., Hwang, 2023). Although there is some research deploying an interactional approach to food and eating conducted with other populations, such as (Dutch) participants with a low socioeconomic position (Van der Heijden et al., 2022, 2023), and participants from various countries with diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds discussing Chinese and Korean food and eating practices (Brandt & Jenks, 2011), these are the exceptions rather than the rule. There remains considerable scope, therefore, to ensure that research on shared mealtimes presents a more representative and inclusive picture of how people eat together in various cultures and contexts.

In terms of methods, a variety of research approaches and methods are deployed. In research on mealtimes as cultural and societal practices and in the cluster of individual outcomes, both qualitative and quantitative approaches are common. To gain in-depth insight into individuals' experiences and perceptions regarding shared mealtimes and eating together, qualitative research using predominantly interviews or focus group discussions is conducted. To identify associations or causal relationships and ascertain patterns across large populations, quantitative approaches with (quasi-)experimental, longitudinal or cross-sectional designs are typically used, with self-report measures such as survey questionnaires, food diaries, and census records as empirical data. Observational designs using video recordings of mealtimes as empirical data are also used, sometimes combined with self-report measures. Research on interactional practices comprises qualitative research and typically deploys a methodological framework and analytical approach that differs considerably from the ones that are common in the other two clusters. Being the central theme of this special issue, a brief introduction to interactional research is provided in Section 6, followed by an overview of articles in this Special Issue which deploy this approach.

6. Introduction to the interactional approach and overview of the special issue

Most interactional research on eating together and shared mealtimes predominantly employ some form of discursive or interactional analysis, often grounded in ethnomethodology (the study of how people make sense of each other in everyday life (e.g., Garfinkel, 1984). Data typically consists of video and/or audio recordings of naturally occurring conversations in everyday settings, such as a family meal or another occasion of eating together. In a line-by-line micro-analysis of the interaction, including embodied behaviour and phonetic details such as pauses, intonation, and speed of speech, it is analyzed how interactants understand *each other*'s utterances in their specific context (for explanations of these methodologies, see, e.g., Potter (2021); Potter and Hepburn (2005); Schegloff (2007); Sidnell and Stivers (2013); Wiggins (2017)). Being a micro-analysis of a specific interaction that takes place within a specific (interactional) context, time, and place, insights provide explanations of how people understand each other in that specific context. Put differently, it does not suggest a causal relationship of what will happen in future interactions, though it can provide an *explanation* for what happens in an interaction and insight into patterns and regular features of interaction that *might* be produced in different settings. These patterns and features of interaction may reveal common-sense norms, and what people actually *do* in their everyday practices, which may be overlooked by self-report measures (Versteeg, 2018; Wiggins, 2004).

It was noted above that social interaction, in some form, is a central theme throughout the interdisciplinary field of research on shared mealtimes. The cluster of work that focuses specifically on interactional practices is, however, a relatively small proportion of this much broader field. This special issue therefore showcases a sample of contemporary work in this area to illustrate its potential and stimulate further developments that might include interdisciplinary collaboration. In Section 5, for instance, we identified commonalities but also gaps in current research that could be addressed in future work. By taking a more detailed approach to what happens between people during shared mealtimes and being perceptive to the importance of language and gestures on occasions where people eat together, questions raised by other fields could be answered. For instance, novel insights could be gained to support people towards healthy and sustainable eating practices by connecting to their lived experiences at the dinner table. We argue that it is beneficial for any researcher in the field of eating and mealtimes as well as for professionals engaged in eating and mealtimes in practice, to learn from insights derived from interactional work on eating together and shared mealtimes. We therefore encourage the further development of work on interactional practices in eating together and shared mealtimes.

The Special Issue includes six empirical papers in which the interactional practices of eating together and shared mealtimes are examined. Each paper analyses video recordings of naturally occurring conversations in a variety of (interactional) contexts. Together, these

papers showcase how social interaction comprises the foundation of eating practices in a variety of settings where people eat together and/or share meals. Specifically, two papers explore mealtime interactions in institutional settings where one person assists another person with eating, i.e., an infant in early childhood education and care, or an older adult with dementia (Bateman, 2024; Wiggins, Majlesi, et al., 2024). In addition, three papers display how sensory experiences of food are interactionally organized and constructed (Hänggi & Mondada, 2024; Svensson, 2024; Wiggins, Cromdal, & Willemsen, 2024). Finally, one paper focuses on the interactional construction of socializing children into 'good manners' concerning bodily conduct in child-parent family mealtime interactions (Caronia & Colla, 2024).

The first paper in the Special Issue explores how assistance in eating is a collaboratively achieved experience between infants (0–2 years) and early childhood teacher-practitioners in early childhood centres in Wales (Bateman, 2024). Bateman (2024) shows how teacher-practitioners initiate an offer to help infants with eating, as well as how infants themselves recruit assistance with eating through multimodal resources, i.e., by showing a food item that is causing trouble. Teacher-practitioners treat this as a cue that assistance is being required, and subsequently provide the required assistance as it is understood by them (Bateman, 2024).

The second paper similarly focuses on how eating is collaboratively achieved between two persons during episodes of 'assisted eating' between caregivers and infants during preschool lunches, and caregivers and older adults with dementia in care homes in Sweden (Wiggins, Majlesi, et al., 2024). Wiggins, Majlesi, et al., 2024 identify three stages in assisted eating: establishing joint attention, offering the food, and transferring food into the mouth. Through interactional practices including multimodal features such as eye gaze, hand gestures, and vocalizations, as well as through the active participation of the caregiver and the assisted person, assisted eating becomes a joint accomplishment and a caring practice (Wiggins, Majlesi, et al., 2024).

In the third paper, Hänggi and Mondada (2024) immerse themselves in the interactional practices of multisensorial explorations of food by visitors of a completely dark restaurant in Switzerland. In this context, as opposed to gastronomic restaurants, sight is insufficient for visitors to specify what is on their plate. Hänggi and Mondada (2024) explore how the sequences commonly initiated with visitors' inquiry "what is this?" are designed, and how these sequences accomplish actions as derived from other visitors' responses, while they are in their own endeavours of identifying the food. It becomes clear that visitors' multisensorial examinations of the food is being made publicly available to their co-visitors, and how the food is examined and identified through joint interactional and tasting practices of the visitors.

The fourth paper explores the interactional organization of food tasting in 3–6 year old children during preschool lunches in Sweden (Wiggins, Cromdal, & Willemsen, 2024). Combining rare insights on how children taste food during everyday mealtimes and interactional research on how adults taste food, Wiggins, Cromdal, and Willemsen (2024) identify how children make their tastings publicly available and how these are a collaborative, multisensory activity between child and teacher, involving multiple embodied practices. Although the sequential organisation of how children taste food appears to be highly similar to how adults taste, Wiggins, Cromdal, and Willemsen (2024) uncover that children's food tasting during these preschool lunches is framed by teachers and sometimes children as personal development, and that individualising the taste of the child is treated as important knowledge at an institutional level.

The fifth paper by Svensson (2024) shows how gustatory features of eating are treated and how talking about food can be used as a resource for membership categorization by participants of a cooking workshop for immigrants in Switzerland. Participants of the cooking workshop treated gustatory features of food not only as publicly available, but also as accountable, including accountability for noticeable absence of food evaluations. The analysis furthermore reveals how talking about food could be used by the participants as a resource for 'membership categorization' (Svensson, 2024), and relates to issues relevant to cultural inclusion and eating practices.

In the sixth paper, Caronia and Colla (2024) engage in the study of how socialisation of 1–6 year old children into 'good manners' concerning bodily conduct is interactionally constructed in child-parent interactions during family meals in Italy. The observations by Caronia and Colla (2024) are twofold. First, through 'micro-politics of good manners', children are socialised into specific cultural principles on what constitutes appropriate bodily conduct at the table (e.g., how to sit properly). Second, children are socialised into a foundational principle of social behaviour: own behaviour requires self-monitoring according to the perspective of the 'generalized other'. Furthermore, it is being argued that, corresponding to historical literature on 'good manners', to date, the contemporary family meal still constitutes a site where children are socialised into bodily conduct as a practice that needs to be (self-) monitored and shaped according to moral standards (Caronia & Colla, 2024).

7. Conclusion

The research field of eating together and shared mealtimes is an interdisciplinary landscape with diverse theoretical and methodological approaches. Nonetheless, in the discussion of three research clusters in this field – eating together and shared mealtimes as societal or cultural practices, individual outcomes, and interactional practices – it becomes clear that there are common areas of interest. Interdisciplinary collaboration, between researchers from various scientific disciplines as well as between researchers, professionals engaged in eating and mealtimes in practice, and participants from various study populations, allows us to complement and learn from each other, enabling us to understand and tackle more complex issues related to eating. Moreover, social interaction is irrefutably an inseparable and foundational aspect of eating practices in social settings. There is considerable scope for including a greater diversity of cultures and participant groups that are currently absent in mealtime research. We encourage the further development of the field of research on interactional practices of eating together and shared mealtimes to facilitate these processes.

Ethical statement

This paper did not involve human or non-human (animal) participants, human or animal material, nor human or animal data. Therefore, obtaining ethical approval was not required for this paper.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Amy van der Heijden: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Investigation, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Sally Wiggins:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Investigation, Data curation, Conceptualization.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare, other than being the guest editors for the Special Issue on *Interactional approaches to eating together and shared mealtimes*. This manuscript is intended to be published as Editorial for the Special Issue.

Data availability

No data was used for the research described in the article.

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