

Just One? Solo Dining, Gender and Temporal Belonging in Public Spaces

by **Kinneret Lahad and Vanessa May**

Senior Lecturer NCJW Women and Gender Studies Program Tel-Aviv University, Israel; Morgan Centre for Research into Everyday Lives

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Abstract

In recent years, various lifestyle websites have offered tips on eating out alone as well as lists of the best restaurants for solo dining in major cities of the world. Utilising the theoretical concepts of participation units, territories of the self (Goffman 1972[1971]) and belonging (May 2011, 2013), this paper explores the challenges that spatio-temporal conventions pose for women solo diners in particular. Through the lens of solo dining, we explore being alone and belonging in shared public spaces, and the gendered nature of aloneness and respectability. The paper contributes to existing theory by examining the influence that time has on a woman solo diner's 'single' participation unit, her ability to lay claim to public space and her relationship with the surrounding social environment. The paper concludes by exploring what the new trend of solo dining can offer and the consequences this has for how sociologists conceptualise sociality in public spaces.

Keywords: *Belonging, Participation Units, Solo Dining, Time, Gendered Respectability*

Introduction

1.1 In recent years, an increasing number of restaurant owners have come to recognise solo diners as having significant purchasing power, and have accordingly developed new marketing strategies aimed at catering to and attracting this growing population. At the same time, as we discuss below, more and more solo diners are writing about their experiences, often reflecting on the pleasures and discomforts of solo dining, and solo dining is also a frequently discussed topic on lifestyle, travel and food websites. This paper examines such online texts and focuses on solo dining from the perspective of the challenges that spatio-temporal conventions around the use of public spaces and eating out pose to women in particular. Through the lens of solo dining, we explore being alone and belonging in shared public spaces, and the gendered nature of these. We are particularly interested in the way that women's access and entitlement to, and sense of comfort in, particular public spaces at particular times is either constrained or enabled. In exploring these questions, we employ Skeggs's (1997) notion of gendered respectability. But we also examine the potential that solo dining presents in terms of changing gendered assumptions and perceptions of women in public spaces by building on feminist work that has brought to light how solo women's presence in public is negotiated in relation to heteronormative ideologies (Lahad 2012; forthcoming), for example in the case of solo women travelers (Bianchi 2015; Heimtun 2010; Jordan & Aitchison 2008; McNamara & Prideaux 2010). We add to this body of literature by exploring the gendered nature of solo dining in public spaces, utilising a social interactionist approach. We make use of Goffman's work on co-presence, which 'renders persons uniquely accessible, available, and subject to one another' and on public order, that is, 'the normative regulation of this accessibility' (Goffman 1963a: 22). More specifically, we employ Goffman's (1972[1971]) concepts of participation units – defined as fundamental interactional units of public life that help people manage co-presence – and of territories of the self, by which he referred to a person's ability to claim (temporary) possession of public spaces.

1.2 Our analysis reveals that one's participation unit emerges as a significant category when one dines

alone because it is the lens through which one's presence in public is interpreted, which in turn helps determine the extent to which one is seen as 'fitting in' in a public space and whether one is accorded the protection of civil inattention (Goffman 1963a). One of this paper's theoretical contributions is thus the recognition that participation units influence women's capacity for social agency and respectability in public. Furthermore, we argue that participation units are interpreted differently at different times of day. Goffman does note the temporal and gendered nature of participation units, for example when he observes that whereas lunchtime is a time 'when anyone can appear alone almost anywhere without this giving evidence of how the person is faring in the social world', in contrast, 'dinner and other evening activities ... provide unfavorable information about unaccompanied participants, especially damaging in the case of female participants' (Goffman 1963a: 103-104). Temporality as such is however not an analytical focus of his work. Thus we extend Goffman's theorising by examining the gendered temporal scripts that underlie the unwritten rules concerning collective schedules and rhythms that help determine which participation units are 'acceptable', where and when. But we are also interested in exploring how these gendered temporal scripts could be re-constructed in relation to women's (solo) use of public space. We suggest that as more restaurants cater to the needs of solo diners, women solo diners might more easily be able to lay claim to what we term *territories of the solo dining self*

1.3 We also extend Goffman's work on co-presence in public by exploring in more depth the impact that solo women diners' breaches of the interaction order in restaurants have on their ability to lay a claim to belonging in public spaces, and consequently on their sense of agency in these spaces. May (2011, 2013) has conceptualised belonging as a sense of ease and comfort in one's surroundings and as the process of creating a sense of identification with people, places, cultures and material objects. An important part of this process, according to May (2011), is territorialising space, that is, making space one's own, which entails the ability to move through space and attach meanings to it, an ability that we argue can be curtailed for solo women diners. In this paper, we further develop May's theorising to include temporality as an important aspect of belonging and discuss the ways in which the ability to *territorialise time* can also be important for gaining a sense of belonging in public spaces. In sum, this article offers the novel contribution of building on Goffman's conceptions of participation units and analytically linking them to microsocial experiences of belonging and time.

1.4 In the following section, we outline the data that the paper is based on, as well as our methods of analysis. We begin our analysis by exploring the rise of solo dining and the social conventions according to which eating out is something that 'should' be done in groups of two or more. We then add to this by examining the gendered nature of these conventions, illustrated by the 'Just one?' question so often posed of women solo diners who enter public spaces as a 'single' participation unit (Goffman 1972[1971]). This question highlights gendered hierarchies of belonging to public spaces that demarcate the solo woman diner as out of place and render her visible and a potential target of uncivil attention. That solo women diners are particularly acutely aware of being out of place in the evening as opposed to the daytime serves as an indication of the fact that the social conventions surrounding the use of public spaces are also temporal. The paper concludes by exploring what that the new trend of solo dining can offer women to enable them to territorialise space as well as time so as to lay claim to public spaces and enter a 'with' or sociable time, and the consequences this has for how sociologists conceptualise sociality in public spaces.

Data and methods

2.1 The data for this paper comprise 200 online global media texts published between April 2014 and May 2016 in newspapers such as the *The Guardian*, *The Telegraph*, *The Washington Post*, *BBC* and *Forbes Women* and blogs such as *Solo Friendly.com* and *Women Travellers.com*. The texts chosen for this paper either discussed solo dining as a cultural practice or were accounts written by women solo diners about their experiences of dining alone. The texts for analysis were chosen on the basis of a search for words such as 'solo diners', 'best places to eat alone/dine alone' and 'eating alone', which were fed into the search engine Google. All the texts were written in English and appeared on online blogs, news sites and life style portals which could be identified as culturally Anglo-American. The texts derive from a broad range of different types of source, indicating the growing interest that solo dining is gaining in popular discourse and the news media. In other words the collection of texts is deliberately wide-ranging, to show continuities within the discourse of solo dining. We decided to focus on online texts because the internet is an important forum for these contemporary discussions.

2.2 Thus, the variety of sources suggest that solo dining is becoming a cultural phenomenon that is widely commented upon, and it is as cultural documents that we read these texts. The study of online texts poses new challenges for social research because the ability to assess the socio-economic characteristics of the writers and bloggers is limited (Press and Livingstone 2006: 188). However, building on the tradition of critical discourse

analysis, (Fairclough 2013; Huckin 2002; Van Dijk 1993) this paper does not aim to capture the social identities of the writers themselves, but rather to extract the cultural meanings that are produced in these texts. We perceive these online texts as the discursive site of cultural struggle (Fiske 1996) which offers a unique prism through which to understand how current cultural meanings on solo dining are validated and contested. Because our data comprise texts written by women based in Anglo-American countries (mainly the UK and the US), our findings necessarily reflect Anglo-American cultures. Further research is required to understand how women from different cultural, class and ethnic backgrounds experience eating alone in public settings. Furthermore, we do not take these texts to be describing an 'objective' reality. Instead, they are cultural documents that, while we do not doubt they reflect the experiences of the authors, also reflect the cultural discourses available to them to make sense of their experiences.

2.3 Our line of inquiry applied a Foucauldian (1972) framework which views discourses as systems of knowledge and power relations. This perspective enables us to scrutinise the discursive conventions of gendered time and the social rules that govern solo diners' presence in public spaces. Relatedly, we employed critical discourse analysis methods (CDA) which involve identifying ideological meaning-making processes and offer 'analytic tools that can be deployed in the close reading of editorials, op-ed columns, advertisements, and other public texts' (Huckin 2002: 4). As Huckin further notes, CDA enriches our analysis 'by insisting that such close reading be done in conjunction with a broader contextual analysis, including consideration of discursive practices, intertextual relations, and sociocultural factors'. As such we explore the 'Just one?' question as a discursive practice in which we regard not only the wording of the text but, following the CDA tradition, attempt to understand its macrosocial realms, namely the gendered and heteronormative spatial and gendered scripts that help shape the experiences of solo women diners.

2.4 Furthermore, drawing on works conducted by feminist CDA scholars (Lazar 2005; Sunderland and Litosseliti 2002), we perceive discourse as a social practice that creates certain gendered subject positions and sustains them in a patriarchal social order. Significantly, this perspective enables us to expose the gendered dimensions of solo dining as well as the ways in which the boundaries of femininity are discursively produced, demarcated and negotiated. Hence, this line of inquiry is particularly attuned to gendered discursive practices and to the subtle and explicit forms of sexism and heteronormative assumptions which determine women's entry and access to the public sphere. However, while bearing this in mind, we also perceive discourses as sites of resistance and contestation which thereby can contribute, as Michelle Lazar (2005:6) argues, to ongoing struggles for social change. This line of inquiry thus enables us to explore the opportunities available to women to subvert such gendered and heteronormative expectations.

Taking the bite out of eating alone

3.1 In 2014, major newspapers, online portals and blogs reported in detail about Eenmaal, the world's first restaurant for solo eaters, established in Amsterdam. As Irene Hoofs (2015) reports on the *Bloesem Living* blog, the aim of Eenmaal was to 'crush' the 'stigma of eating alone'. The interest that Eenmaal garnered can be interpreted as part of the extensive media attention that solo dining has received in recent years. Major newspapers such as the *The Guardian*, *Independent*, *The Telegraph* and *The Washington Post* have outlined the benefits of solo dining as well as the continuing suspicion directed towards those who eat alone in public. One can easily find recommendations online for the top places in which to dine alone in cities across the world from New York and London to Sydney and Singapore. The rising trend of solo dining is also reflected in the number of websites that have appeared such as *SoloDining.com* or *Invite for A Bite.com* that offer advice and tips to solo women diners, and travel sites aimed at women who travel alone such as *Smart Women Travelers.com* or *Solo Friendly.com*. Many of these sites refer to what they perceive as the potential for social change whereby experiences of shame and embarrassment often ascribed to solo dining can be transformed such that dining alone could be viewed as an achievement and an entertaining experience. Katy Grant, writing for the *Independent*, describes the way in which solo diners have traditionally been treated in restaurants:

Solo diners who asked for a 'table for one' could once expect to be greeted with pitying looks from restaurant staff before being ushered to a dusty corner of the establishment – most likely next to the lavatories. (Grant 2015)

3.2 The pitying looks noted by Grant probably reflect the common perception that anyone eating on their own in a restaurant is lonely, which, as Laura Moss notes (2014), quoting the food writer Suzanne Lenzer, is seen not as 'a sign of our strength, but of a lack of social standing'. Similarly, Barbara Balfour, writing for the BBC News website, reflects on the stigma traditionally associated with solo dining:

Not too long ago solo dining was synonymous with a greasy takeaway scoffed down in the car, or room service

consumed in the sterile anonymity of your hotel room. This was preferable to the thought of dining alone in a proper restaurant, and the associated stigma of being seen as a 'friendless loser'. (Balfour 2014)

3.3 Within this context it is significant to note that the meal in itself is a sociable and morally charged activity. In 'The sociology of the meal', George Simmel (1997) characterises the meal as the intersection of the individual and the social because not only food and drinks are exchanged. When people share food they engage in sociability, common rituals and manners. Mary Douglas (2014:12) perceives the shared meal as a metaphor of communication and therefore it is not surprising that eating alone is often frowned upon and incurs suspicion (Fischler 2011). Our paper adds a Goffmanian analysis to these discussions of solo meals and sociability. We argue that in the case of solo diners, the suspicion or even stigma they face originates from the configuration of their 'participation unit' (Goffman 1972[1971]). According to Goffman, our routine participation in public life is conducted through the distinction between what he conceptualises as the 'single' and the 'with':

A single is a party of one, a person who has come alone, a person by 'himself' [sic], even though there may be other individuals near him ... A with is a party of more than one whose members are perceived to be 'together'. (Goffman 1972[1971]: 41)

3.4 The data for this paper comprise online texts where the solo diner is described as someone who is *alone* out in public. Thus, when we refer to a 'single' participation unit, this definition is derived from the online texts we analyse. For example, in the blogs about solo dining that we have analysed, women are effectively defining themselves in Goffmanian terms as a 'single'. In addition, as the texts below show, this single participation unit is also often recognized as such by other people. In other words, by definition, solo diners constitute a 'single' participation unit and when appearing in public they lack the required togetherness of the 'with' that is usually expected in restaurants. In other words, the situational co-presence of solo diners contravenes social conventions around eating out in public, expressed for example in the design of restaurants as spaces conducive to sharing and togetherness. As a consequence, solo diners can feel uncomfortable in, and in some cases are excluded from, shared public spaces.

3.5 However, the growing rates of solo diners challenge the required forms of sociability, manners and seating arrangements associated with the common meal. In response, restaurants are having to think of ways to make solo diners feel more welcome, 'for example by fitting more bar seating, or encouraging waiting staff to be more attentive to customers sitting on their own' (Balfour 2014). Ivan Flowers, executive chef at the restaurant Top of the Market in San Diego, where solo diners are seated in such a way that they can watch and interact with the chef, is quoted as saying that:

Our solo diners love watching professional cooking at that level and speed. When there's a pause, they'll start asking questions like 'I made this the other day, how can I prevent it from burning?' ... We do whatever it takes to make it a memorable night. Our solo customers forget they are alone – because they've never been alone from the moment they stepped in. (Balfour 2014)

3.6 Solo diners are thus offered an avenue through which they can save 'face', that is, 'the positive social value' that one can claim for oneself in line with 'approved social attributes' (Goffman 1955: 213) by loosely making them part of a 'with' participation unit. In contrast, Eenmaal, by organising its setting in such a way that every diner has to be seated alone, offers an opportunity to be a 'single' yet not feel isolated, to be alone together in public. The goal of Eenmaal seems to be a fundamental shift in how a 'single' participation unit is perceived in public spaces such as restaurants. The accounts we have analysed are describing a new phase of deliberation and examination which in Goffman's (1959) terms could be interpreted as an attempt to provide a new definition of the situation because they challenge the situational impropriety so often associated with solo dining. Our online sources indicate that the experience of dining alone is undergoing a degree of transformation:

A few months ago my request for a table for one at a busy Covent Garden brasserie earned me a free glass of champagne – not served with a Poor You look but of pity but a Good On You smile. More recently, at a different London restaurant, I was one of three tables of lone diners enjoying a leisurely four-course meal. (Quinn 2015)

3.7 We have above shown the rising popularity and visibility of solo dining, and indicated the ways in which this trend might be changing what is deemed an 'appropriate' participation unit in consumption spaces such as restaurants, which have traditionally been viewed as spaces for sociability among 'withs'. In this paper, we are specifically interested in the gendered aspects of solo dining as experienced by women, an issue we now turn to explore in more depth.

Gendered respectability in public spaces

4.1 Most of the data excerpts cited in the previous section acknowledge the stigma that, at least in the past,

has been attached to eating alone. We now move on to explore websites and blogs written by women solo diners in order to examine in more detail the gendered and heteronormative nature of how eating out alone is viewed. Some authors provide tips for managing the discomfort that eating out alone engenders, others recommend the best places to dine alone, while also outlining the various benefits and pleasures of solo dining. Many women do enjoy dining out alone, as does Carol Margolis, the founder of *Smart Women Travelers.com* and *Pearls of Travel Wisdom.com*, who says:

I'm proud of the fact that I'm very comfortable dining alone in any restaurant. Whether a casual outdoor lunch, a snazzy wine bar or a fancy 'black or white napkin?' kind of place, I'm quite ok with dining alone. (Margolis n.d.)

- 4.2 Yet even these women are aware of the conventions that we have analysed above, according to which solo diners are in breach of the expectation that restaurants are spaces where customers appear in a 'with' participation unit. The following excerpt tells us that this expectation is gendered:

I detest walking into a restaurant to request the dreaded table for one,' says Peachey, who typically makes three or four business trips a month. 'When I walk into a restaurant or bar alone, I feel others see me as either a woman out to pick up men or a sad, lonely spinster. (Becker 2012)

- 4.3 Peachey, as quoted by Becker, is very much aware that as a woman alone she is classified through the binary image that depicts her as either a pathetic spinster or promiscuous. Feminist scholarship has analysed how in some situations, appearing in public alone is not considered a viable option for women because it defies gendered expectations and gender socialisation in general (Gardner 1995; Lahad forthcoming). More specifically, it disobeys the convention that the status and social worth of women is dependent upon and defined in terms of their relationships to men (Oakley 1974; Rich 1980; Ruddick 1989). The above quoted excerpts thus speak to conventional norms and conditions sustaining female respectability (Skeggs 2004). The way that solo women diners are depicted as either out to pick up men or as alone because they have not succeeded in 'holding on to' a man could be seen from this perspective as embodying a form of feminine excess or as a failed kind of femininity (Lahad 2013; Skeggs 2004). These attitudes are illustrated by Radhika Sanghani, writing for *The Telegraph*:

In a world where that's [eating alone] almost taboo, it feels dangerously luxurious to eat out alone, especially when you don't look at your smartphone. The only thing that stops me doing it on a weekly basis (bar my finances) is the reaction I get from waiters, other diners and even the friends I casually mention it too[sic]. My friends vocally express their confusion without biting their tongues: 'What? Why didn't you just ask someone to go with you? Couldn't you just get a takeaway?', ignoring my protestations that I didn't *want* to ask anyone, and I didn't fancy eating it in my living room either. (Sanghani 2014)

- 4.4 It could be inferred that Sanghani's interaction with her friends brings to light some of the conventional expectations about women's presence in public space. A wealth of existing research has charted the gendered nature of public spaces, exploring the various ways in which the private space of the home has traditionally been viewed feminine and respectively the public space has been rendered masculine (see for example Chasteen 1997; Gardner 1995; Valentine 1989). Although there have been significant advances in gender equality in terms of women's entry into the public sphere (for example in politics and the labour market) and consequently their increased presence in public spaces, this body of literature does show that women continue to experience, compared to men, higher degrees of vulnerability, harassment and general feelings of being 'out of place' in public spaces. Similarly to the gendered working class bodies discussed by Skeggs (2004) and Taylor (2007, 2008), the female solo presence needs to be restrained and normalised (Lahad 2012, 2013, 2014), either by changing one's participation unit to a 'with' or by staying out of public spaces by getting a take-away instead. From this perspective, a woman's participation unit matters because it comprises a significant prism through which gendered and heteronormative expectations are filtered. Solo dining thus allows us to shed light on some of the interactional rules and tacit understandings of what is considered decent and respectful. As we go on to discuss below, the ways in which solo women diners are viewed and treated also illuminate how female respectability is dependent upon temporal conventions and one's belonging to the right participation unit at the right time. But first, we explore the increased visibility that women can experience when dining out alone, and the attendant uncivil attention that they can encounter, and the implications this has for women's ability to claim a territory of the self (Goffman 1972[1971]) while out in public.

'Just one?': Demarcating hierarchies of belonging

- 5.1 Women solo diners are familiar with the 'Just one?' question so often asked by waiting staff, as they peer behind one, expecting to see late-arriving companions. Carol Margolis explains her reaction to such questioning of her solo status and her use of humor as a defensive strategy:

What I'm not content with ... and downright ticked with ... is hearing these two words as I enter a restaurant: 'Just one?' These two little words, asked so innocently, really get my goat. I've often wanted to respond to 'Just one?' with: Yes, put me in the pity section please.
No, a table for 3, please. Me, my book and I.
I have my imaginary friend with me – you don't see him? (Margolis n.d.)

5.2 The 'Just one?' question reflects a limited and bounded invitation to public space, signalling to the solo diner that her right to claim a territory of the self is under question. By the term 'territory', we refer to the meaning that Goffman (1972[1971]) ascribed to it, namely in conjunction with a person's ability to at least temporarily claim possession of public space. The actual space that they lay claim to is situational, and encompasses their 'stall' and personal space (to which we return in the following section). Waiting staff in restaurants act as gatekeepers to a diner's claim for a 'stall', that is, a 'well-bounded space' that is 'fixed in the setting', such as a table in a café or restaurant, and to which 'individuals can lay temporary claim' (Goffman 1972[1971]: 54). The 'Just one?' question demonstrates a spatial orientation whereby the party of one is expected to turn into a party of two or more before their claim for a stall is considered fully legitimate, and thus exposes the 'deviant' solo diner as out of place. Margolis expresses the gap between her sense of comfort as a frequent woman traveler and the perceived lack that the repetitive question indicates. We suggest that the 'Just one?' question outlines a particular interactional order based on the implicit and explicit rules of sharing a public space. It conveys a sense of surprise and even disappointment that one is alone, and could also be interpreted as an accusation of breaching conventions by dining out alone. This breach then limits the solo diner's ability to territorialise space, that is, to lay claim to it, thus likely diminishing their sense of belonging in the public space of the restaurant (cf. May 2011).

5.3 Furthermore, the 'Just one?' question can lead to a feeling of isolation because it highlights to the solo diner that she is alone amongst people who form a group that she stands outside of. As Margolis writes, even though this 'little question' means no harm and has no intention to offend, it can have a profound impact on the solo diner:

Dining solo is one of the most uncomfortable situations for many women. These words just make it more uncomfortable. I walk away feeling that the host thinks I have no friends, or no special person in my life ... that I'm a loser who can't find anyone to dine with. I want to defend myself, to say that I'm proud to be so comfortable in my own skin that I don't need a companion to complete me, that I do know how to order a great glass of wine all by myself, but it's not worth it. (Margolis n.d)

5.4 We contend that even though the question is ostensibly benign, being asked whether one is 'Just one?' uncovers *hierarchies of belonging*. Wemyss (2009) discusses hierarchies of belonging in relation to ethnicity whereby ethnic minority people are deemed to be less entitled than ethnic majority people are to claim national belonging. We argue that women, particularly solo women, can feel unable to claim entitlement to shared public spaces. The 'Just one?' question is an expression of devaluation, social dislocation and the perceived lack of fit within sociable norms related to appearance in public. The solo diner is being told that she is encroaching upon public space (and time) that has certain conventions that delineate who is entitled to belong, where to (and when). And this is exactly why the 'Just one?' question can be so embarrassing, because it reveals the power structure within which the woman solo diner has to justify her presence in public space. When such hierarchies of belonging are made visible, the solo diner can feel excluded and consequently experience increasing vulnerability and loss of sense of agency (May 2013). Being asked the question 'Just one?' entails a moment of exposure denying the solo diner the acceptance granted to the dyad or the group, and it is the ensuing sense of increased visibility that we now turn to examine.

The visibility of solo women diners

6.1 The moment when the solo diner's capacity to claim a territory of the self is put into doubt is one of fragility and exposure that makes the solo diner's discrediting attribute highly visible, which in turn can make her feel that she is 'nakedly expose[d] ...to invasions of privacy' (Goffman 1963b: 16). Thus one of the consequences of being the carrier of a discrediting attribute while out in public is the *uncivil attention* that one can receive (Goffman 1963b; Gardner Brooks 1995; Garland-Thomson 2009). Solo women diners in our data report feeling exposed to 'quickly smoothed over expressions of surprise and repeated sneaked glances' (Sanghani 2014) as well as open stares from fellow diners that signal 'isn't she pitiful eating alone' (Kelly n.d). The stigma of appearing in a restaurant as a 'single' participation unit, and as a woman at that, can thus cause the solo woman diner to feel as though she is 'on' and 'having to be self-conscious and calculating about the impression [s]he is making' (Goffman 1963b: 14).

6.2 To understand why being under the scrutinising gaze of others can be experienced as so

uncomfortable, we turn to the second aspect of the territory of the self as described by Goffman, namely personal space. Having laid claim to a stall, the solo diner's territory of the self requires the further protection of personal space, that is, '[t]he space surrounding an individual anywhere within which an entering other causes the individual to feel encroached upon' (Goffman 1972[1971]: 52). Personal space is not fixed, but situational: 'legitimate claim to it varies greatly' according to time and place (Goffman 1972[1971]: 54). There exists a large body of symbolic interactionist work inspired by Goffman that focuses on the ways in which people in a 'with' participation unit can occupy space, through the use of body language and by spreading out material objects such as newspapers and clothing, consequently providing themselves with a sense of being in quasi-private space (e.g. DeVault 2000; Manzo 2005). And, importantly, others in these shared public spaces tend to tactfully respect the invisible boundaries that dyads and groups thus erect. The 'with' participation unit 'can expect to be deferred to by outsiders who would make contact with one of the members' (Goffman 1972[1971]: 41) and to be treated with the courtesy of civil inattention (Goffman 1963a), meaning that they are not openly stared at or approached for conversation.

6.3 But, as the excerpts above demonstrate, although solo women diners might be able to make a claim to a stall such as a dining table, their territory of the self can nevertheless be violated by encroaching upon their personal space through intrusive looks, coming too close or addressing the person (Goffman 1963a: 69-71). As Ruby Lohman, a food reviewer, is quoted as saying: 'As a young woman dining alone, I'll often be blatantly stared at, hit on or patronised. Maybe all three' (Boys 2014). In other words, a solo diner, and a woman solo diner in particular, is not as successfully able to claim the protections of a quasi-private space as a 'with' participation unit is, leaving her open to 'the pain of being stared at' (Goffman 1963a: 88) and even approached. Although Goffman (1972[1971]: 49) noted that 'the fundamental arrangement in public life is that singles and withs are to be treated as though sealed off from their setting', we contend that women out in public on their own can still constitute what Goffman (1963a: 126) called 'open persons', who are 'considered so meagre in sacred value' that they 'can be engaged at will' while out in public – a characteristic that open persons and stigmatised persons share (Goffman 1963b: 16). It seems as though the territories of the solo dining self are easily rendered fragile and porous. Given that civil inattention is a privilege that people can expect if they 'behave properly', such violations of one's territory of the self can be interpreted as sanctions against perceived impropriety, thus calling into question the person's claims to a moral self (Goffman 1963a: 87-88). As we go on to explore in the following section, the lack of belonging and sense of uncomfortable visibility and exclusion that solo women diners experience is particularly acute in the evenings.

Temporal conventions of eating out

7.1 We have above focused on the social conventions that make dining alone so uncomfortable, especially for women. Using Goffman, we have highlighted the extent to which visibility and vulnerability in public is situational. We now go on to build upon Goffman's (1963a: 103-104) observation about the ways in which a person's 'single' participation unit can be interpreted differently depending on the time of day. We do so by illuminating the role that temporal codes of conduct play in how women solo diners are viewed. As Eviatar Zerubavel (1981) clarifies, the temporal regularities of our everyday lives are among the major background expectancies that shape the basis of the 'normalcy' of our social environment. Belonging to public spaces for solo diners is consequently temporally delineated such that public spaces at certain times are especially out of bounds, as exemplified by the following excerpt from Radhika Sanghani's column, where she describes the particular disdain with which solo diners can be met in the evening (though she also notes that these temporal codes of conduct are culturally specific):

It's worse at dinner times, because it seems the British can forgive a solo luncher, but not a solo diner. There is an unspoken code about restaurant eating and when it is acceptable to eat alone. Coffees and snacks are OK to do alone. Likewise with breakfast, or even a brunch, where cafés often offer long canteen-style tables and there's no shame in getting a Full English and a coffee. Lunch is a similar affair. ...It gets worse with dinner. I've gone out for a meal alone countless times in foreign cities, and no one has ever looked twice ... But here in Britain, everyone stares. (Sanghani 2014)

7.2 Sanghani's observation sheds light upon how temporality affects one's sense of belonging and feeling at ease with one's participation unit in public. Entering solo into a restaurant in the evening means a diminished entitlement to a territory of the self and subjects one to a particularly strong social gaze. Traditionally, a woman's solo presence in public after dark represents being out of time and out of place – which creates an acute *temporal consciousness* and impacts one's ability to exercise *temporal agency* (Lahad 2012, 2016, forthcoming). In the middle of the day, a solo woman diner is less subject to scrutinising and pitiful gazes than she would be during the evening. In this way, having lunch alone leads to less exposure and intensified visibility as a woman solo diner, and she can be accorded with civil inattention. In other words, a woman solo diner's ability to lay claim

to a territory of the self is increased during the daytime, as is accordingly her ability to lay claim to belonging in the public space of the restaurant. Thus, seemingly trivial and mundane interactional rules can have dramatic consequences for many women, who are accordingly required to strategically plan their presence in public. For example, Steph, a woman blogger writing for the *Twenty-SomethingTravel.com* blog, advises the novice solo diner that if they find that 'tackling a dinner is too much', they should 'choose the lunch hour' which is 'way easier' because this is 'more casual, less expensive', 'less romantic, maybe less social in general' and thus 'a more relaxing time for dining alone' than evenings are ([Steph 2015](#)).

- 7.3** In the evening, a woman's participation unit as a 'single' breaches spatio-temporal conventions, making her status as a solo diner visible and exposing her to uncivil attention. According to this interpretation, being a 'single' during a 'with' time reflects a temporal incongruity or anomaly that is noticed ([Zerubavel 1981](#)). In relation to our point above about the hierarchies of belonging that solo women diners bump up against, eating alone in public in the evening marks a lack of temporal entitlement and thus an inability to claim a sense of belonging during a 'with' time. Differently put, one's claims to a 'stall' and to the protections of personal space are more limited. It can be assumed that consequently, a woman's solitary presence in the evening prevents her from feeling part of the crowd. We therefore argue that in order to be able to claim a territory of the self and a right to belong, one must be able to territorialise not only space, but also time (cf. [May 2011](#)). In other words, belonging requires the capacity to claim one's right to be somewhere at a particular time. The re-claiming of time exercised by solo women diners mirrors global feminist initiatives such as 'Take Back the Night' marches in which women claim ownership of time and space ([Hubbard and Colosi 2015](#))^[1]. Such repositioning gives women the opportunity to feel at ease and establish a more confident and secure position in the public realm. In our concluding remarks we explore the potential that the rising popularity and changing patterns of solo dining represent for stretching the boundaries of temporal belonging, female agency and respectability.

Conclusion: Solo diners territorialising space and time

- 8.1** In this paper, we have used Goffman's ([1972\[1971\]](#)) concepts of participation unit and territories of the self, as well as May's ([2011, 2013](#)) theorising of belonging to explore the increasingly popular trend of solo dining. We have explored this phenomenon as one where solo diners are challenging conventions according to which consumption spaces such as restaurants are 'with' spaces which should only be entered with the appropriate participation unit of a dyad or group. Furthermore, we have analysed the gendered nature of these conventions whereby a woman's respectability is threatened if she appears alone in a restaurant, and the attendant uncivil attention that she risks being exposed to. In other words, women solo diners bump up against gendered hierarchies of belonging which delineate who is able to territorialise public space so as to lay claim to belonging there. Thus the solo dining trend is also an opportunity to explore how one's participation unit can influence one's feeling of being at home, of experiencing safety and comfort (cf. [May 2013: 82](#)).
- 8.2** The original contribution of this paper is that it extends Goffman's and May's concepts by analysing time as a significant dimension of social interaction and of belonging. Our analysis has shown that the unwritten rules according to which women diners are judged rely not only on what is considered an appropriate participation unit in a particular public space but also on the temporal conventions surrounding eating out. The solo diner, particularly the woman solo diner, is in breach of temporal expectations concerning when it is appropriate to appear in public as a 'single' participation unit. Time is thus also a crucial denominator for fitting in or being out of place such that our sense of belonging can shift at different times even in the same public space. Consequently, dining alone in the evening leads to much greater risk of being perceived as in the wrong place, at the wrong time, than does enjoying lunch on one's own. Our paper thus demonstrates how belonging and female respectability are dependent on *situational temporal contexts*. One's sense of being at ease and entitled to feeling comfort ([Taylor 2007, 2008](#)) is derived from conforming with temporal conventions. We conclude that belonging to the right participation unit at the right time allows people to territorialise time and to make time their own in a way that can elude solo diners. Territories of the solo dining self are thus gendered and temporal in a way that renders them fragile and porous.
- 8.3** But there are also new strategies emerging for solo diners to territorialise space and time in their own right. Solo dining spaces and solo diner friendly restaurants challenge the spatio-temporal norms that make appearing alone in public, particularly in the evening, an anomaly. Solo diners are in other words able to make space and time their own, and thus to lay claim to belonging in public spaces as a 'single' participation unit. Restaurants such as Eenmaal can offer more opportunities for claiming a stall in public and having one's personal space protected from violation. Such an altered spatial and temporal interactional context can set new normative codes for being alone in public and of sociability. Furthermore, the solo dining trend demonstrates how

belonging can be achieved through subtle changes in one's social and material surroundings, leading to shifting experiences of fitting in and feeling at un/ease and experiencing dis/comfort (May 2013: 81; Taylor 2007, 2008). An environment which caters to solo diners can enable them to identify with their surroundings and give rise to a *feeling of belonging*. As we have noted, this sense of belonging is not just dependent on being able to territorialise space but also time, and thus we argue that it is important that future research pays attention to the ways in which people can (or cannot) build a sense of belonging to time.

- 8.4 Hence, new possibilities for eating alone can serve as an avenue for understanding everyday belonging – which is gendered, situated and temporal – as related to the participation units one belongs to and is identified with in public. The increasingly popular and visible trend of solo dining brings new options for feeling a sense of belonging, in an anonymous way, to other people who are also solo in public because they enable a recognition of one's 'single' participation unit (Goffman 1972[1971]). We also argue that the solo diner is an interesting vantage point from which to study 'with' or sociable time, and that solo diners might be currently helping to re-define and create new forms of temporal belonging. Creating more diverse spatial and temporal routes could pave the way of attaining a sense of belonging in what are usually characterised as 'with' spaces and times, even if not interacting with other people. In such spaces, solo people are granted civil inattention (which can be particularly important for women).
- 8.5 Our analysis above illuminates that solo diners can be seen as a new category of identification and not merely a stigmatising one that reflects situational impropriety and failed femininity. The subtle changes in temporal and spatial norms that we have discussed above might enable a changed perception of the solo diner, paving the way for women to lay claim to being alone in public yet 'part of a bigger whole' (May 2013: 153). These new options have the potential to also widen the ways in which gendered respectability is configured in everyday life. While a woman solo diner is to a large extent still a target of special curiosity deprived of the anonymity and civil inattention granted to the 'with' participation unit, these new spaces can help make solo women diners unremarkable and help secure their right to personal space. Creating a new interactional order would allow for the 'Just one?' question to be replaced with a welcoming 'Follow me, please', thus reducing the desire for concealment or to avoid this interaction altogether. In other words, such new interactional orders could offer women new options for gaining and employing spatial and temporal agency.

Notes

- 1 'Take Back the Night' marches are annual nonviolent protests which demonstrate against sexual violence, emphasising the vulnerability of women in the night-time city.

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