

# EATING TOGETHER FROM THE CLEANING WORLD: GATHERING ALL FOODS TOGETHER AS THE ULTIMATE FORM OF COMMENSALITY

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**Abstract:** *Food is a social and cultural symbol and seems to have a long history in anthropology and sociology. Commensality, or the act of eating together, seems to have social effects in creating or consolidating a group. This study examined why workers in the cleaning industry choose to eat together and how this habit is related to high job satisfaction. Factors that seem to promote relationships within the group and subjective well-being appear to be influenced by the need for socialization during work breaks. The main conclusion of the study is that shared meal breaks, which involve eating together (not from separate plates), make cleaning employees feel more socially connected and increase cooperation among them. The research aims to highlight the meals organized by cleaning workers. The goal of understanding how cleaning agents experience and attribute meaning to these moments of eating together is an important part of understanding their activity in the social context of life.*

**Keywords:** eating together, Food and Ritual, Commensality, Symbol

## 1. Introduction

"Homo sapiens settled alongside Homo sapiens and ate together to survive together." (Dragomir, 2021) Commensality or the act of eating together has been proven to have social effects in creating or consolidating a group (De Vriese, 2022). Food is a necessity for all species, but we are the only ones who cook the food we eat. Thus, "cooking becomes more than a necessity, it is the symbol of our humanity" (Fox, n.d., 1). But what happens when we share the food we have? From a cultural perspective, food traditions differ not only in terms of the type of food consumed but also in how the food is eaten at the table (Wooley and Fishbach, 2019).

"If you share food with a stranger, it means you humanize them" (Dragomir, 2018). Sharing food and the time spent to nourish oneself becomes a symbol. Generosity is linked to social generosity and can create alliances. In the workplace, everyone has the right to a lunch break, sometimes even with food provided by the companies they work for. What is truly important is what we do during that break, who we choose to spend our time with, and how or if we share the food we have.

An analysis of the meal break process for employees in the cleaning industry is relevant for understanding the relationships that occur within the group. People do not simply consume food, but they have an entire ritual. The handling of food, the type of food, and the way it is served are signs that ensure distinction. Thus, the meal break can be viewed from both the perspective of what the worker eats and how they do it. The first perspective can capture the food and its connection to theories in the sociology of consumption. We have a system in which food, through the meanings it conveys, contributes to the positioning and differentiation of individuals in society. The second perspective, which is the subject of this work, is related to how meals are taken. We witness an intersection between food consumption and work relationships around it. Individuals can choose to share the food they eat, choose not to share, or put it together. Taking all these aspects into consideration, we can say that by analyzing the meal break of an employee in the cleaning industry, a profile can be constructed. Another perspective captured in the phrase "Leaders eat with people" is a viewpoint developed by Csibi and Predescu (2023) in their book "Leaders Eat Last," another

perspective by Sinek (2017). Both capture hierarchical relationships alongside an important practice - eating together. Although it is not part of the subject of this research, hierarchical differences among those who eat together remain a subject on which we can reflect.

In a broad sense and as a starting point in developing the topic at hand, we have considered dimensions such as meal-taking practices, attitudes and beliefs about meal-taking, and work relationships. I will investigate the importance of food sharing and the meal-taking process in work relationships. The perception of food sharing and the process of eating together can be related to socialization, culture, social values, rituals, and associated symbols.

Employees in the cleaning industry do not have private space or personal time. The space dedicated to the cleaning team is generally shared with colleagues and materials for carrying out the tasks. While employees are encouraged to share the limited space, they are not encouraged to take breaks together. Breaks can vary from 10 minutes to half an hour or even an hour. If you have ever tried to enforce rules to prevent them from taking breaks together, you know that it is almost impossible to make them not take breaks together. And according to studies, it seems that we should not even desire that.

## **2. The conceptualization of commensality**

Research on work typically focuses on issues related to interactions with others during the course of an activity, rather than during meal breaks. On the other hand, research in the field of food is based on directions such as "dining at home, in our local community, and while traveling" (Roberts, 2021, 15). There is less research that specifically focuses on the practice of having meals at the workplace, especially lunch together for workers in the cleaning industry. The practice of sharing a meal has been considered to have a key influence on eating behaviour (Bjornwall et al., 2021). According to a comparative study, the authors have shown that in most situations, eating alone was examined in relation to depressive symptoms compared to eating together (Bjornwall et al., 2021). Additionally, studies in the field show that those who eat together with others less than once a month had a significantly lower rate of subjective well-being (Ishikawa et al., 2016).

Everyday life is invaded by a multitude of interactions we have with various other people, objects, or devices. Breaks and moments when we pause our activities are oases of tranquility. An analysis of the process of taking these breaks reveals important social aspects, but especially the types of work relationships and individual characteristics. Commensality, as the practice of sharing food or eating together with people sitting at the same table (Fischler, 2011), has gained increased interest in food studies. The importance of commensality is linked to social interactions (Sobal, 2000, Bugge and Almas, 2006), the positive consequences it can have on health (Marshall and Anderson, 2002), or even as an expression of the core of a society (Koponen, 2020). Furthermore, Fischler (2011) views it from a perspective that differentiates humans from animals. Studies in the field (Soban and Nelson, 2003; Makela, 2009; Holm et al., 2016; Koponen, 2020) suggest that commensality can be expressed in different ways. In Holm et al. (2016), we find the idea that having dinner on the couch in front of the TV is not considered commensal eating, while Soban and Nelson (2003) raise the idea that sharing a beer with neighbors can be considered a commensal act (Koponen, 2020).

The main actor of this practice is the cleaning employee. They generally belong to the lower class of society and have limited resources. This implies that they would be more tempted not to share these resources and, consequently, the food. For cleaning staff, self-fulfillment is a value. Workers who struggle with dirt have a worldview that is strongly linked to nepotism, strong ties within the local community, and the need to be appreciated for the work they do. Their relationships are based on needs. Specifically, this means that they feel a greater need to belong to a group. Expanding and strengthening the relationships they have operates on rules related to "genealogical humanity," meaning their relationships are still tied to their place of origin, the community they come from, and, implicitly, the workplace. Lunch

breaks can provide cleaning employees with a space between work and leisure time where they can get to know each other better and form trusting relationships.

Grignon (2001) in his study highlights the idea that eating certain foods in certain ways defines a group. I believe that a moment when everyone's food comes together and forms a meal from which everyone can eat as much as they want and whatever they want can be considered an act of supreme commensality. To understand the relationships that form at work, it is useful to see the process of meal taking within the group. Studies such as Wooley and Fishbach (2019) bring to light an extremely important subject for understanding the social context of eating together. Specifically, they have shown that sharing food from a single plate has led to increased coordination among those involved, made them behave more cooperatively and less competitively towards each other, compared to those who eat from separate plates. Common actions such as pooling all the food together and subsequently eating them involve behaviours that lead to better cohesiveness among group members (Haidt, Seder, and Kesebir, 2008).

Consuming food from a communal plate, as Wooley and Fishbach (2019) argue, stimulates the growth of closeness, so people feel more socially connected. Furthermore, people who eat together seem to be perceived by others as more connected (Kniffin and Wansink, 2012).

The difference between eating and dining is the metaphorical difference between eating one's own food or sharing the food with others. Based on the distinction between eating as the purpose of nourishing the body and dining as "putting food into our mouths" (Sandy, 2012), we can extrapolate to the difference between one type of commensality where we sit at the same table and eat our food, and another type of commensality that we have named supreme, in which we share the food we have. "It's about people and what happens around our tables, and it's good for our souls" (Sandy, 2012).

### **3. Research methods and tools**

The article is structured on one hand on qualitative research where we explored through interviews the cognitive processes behind having lunch breaks with coworkers, and on the other hand, a qualitative research where we observed this practice among workers in the cleaning industry.

Based on the qualitative survey and in-depth interviews, I discovered the experiences and feelings of 16 cleaning agents who helped me answer the research questions: How do employees symbolically relate to lunch breaks? How do they spend their lunch breaks? What types of interactions do cleaning agents have during lunch breaks? Regarding the observation of the practice of eating together, I was able to see how this practice unfolds.

The main objective of the research is to synthesize the symbolic processes through which agents in the cleaning industry build their relationships based on lunch breaks. The aim was to observe and understand if this practice builds and supports work relationships and interactions within the group.

People adopt a certain type of behaviour towards other people or objects, taking into account the significance they attribute to them. The idea put forward by Blumer (1986) in explaining symbolic interaction is the starting point in understanding the relationship between the interaction that I refer to as material with everything that encompasses the lunch break. Therefore, I will now focus on the common experiences regarding lunch breaks and how they take place as an aspect of the daily life of employees in the cleaning industry.

### **4. Lunch break at work: A redefinition of commensality**

The approach of sharing all food and meals to be consumed together serves as a main point for considering work lunch breaks. A new type of commensality shows how employees in the cleaning industry tend to bring food, vegetables, cooked meals to work, which they will share and serve to everyone. The role of food is not only to satisfy a basic need, but it also

equalizes and creates equality among workers in the cleaning industry - "We eat together, we are all the same" (Alina). The discourse around sharing food can be considered related to humanity because "If someone doesn't have, we give to them. Other times, if we don't have, they give to us. We have to be human" (Maria). We can reach the idea that lunch for most cleaning agents we have discussed with or observed during the break is linked to the idea of fairness. The moment when "everyone brings what they have, a tomato, cheese, bacon, it doesn't matter" (Nelu) creates a moment when "we feel good, we rest" (Alina), and for cleaning employees, it creates relationships based on "friendship, colleagues, together. And so we don't have time to meet. We are just at work and at home" (Maria).

All of this is nothing more than projections of a meal taken together with friends, colleagues, who are not "always at home with their spouse and children" (Ileana). What Ileana says can be interpreted in terms of the need to spend time with other people in close proximity. But what is so special about sharing food together?

The configuration of the table is different depending on the relationships that exist between those people. By simultaneously observing two standard meals - one of the employees working, for example, in a department, and one of the execution employees within a cleaning services company, we can observe a difference related not only to the consumed food but also to the configuration of the table. Of course, there are situations where department employees have communal meals or situations where each cleaning employee eats their own food. The idea expressed earlier is related to the frequency with which these types of communal lunches occur. Relationships, discussions, at first glance, may seem the same, but looking closely and discussing with them, you will find that "we are closer. It's nice to eat there, you know, together. It's still together even if everyone has their own sandwich from home, but... I don't know... I like it more when everything is communal" (Ioana).

Seems like communal meals are suitable only in certain contexts, in a specific environment, and only with certain people. However, despite the differences, both types of lunch experiences create a sense of well-being and closeness among employees. "And if we argued or if I got annoyed that day, sometimes we make up when we eat" (Mihai). Therefore, it is possible to view the practice of eating together at work as "a moment we look forward to. We all expect it and eat together" (Nelu). Regardless of how they are divided during work shifts, the same types of practices exist. "I don't like everyone, but we eat together" (Victor) is a statement that can undermine any belief that breaks should not be taken together. I believe that welcoming everyone to the table and sharing food together allows the act of commensality to take on new forms and be redefined.

From discussions with employees in the cleaning industry, I have understood that socializing during mealtime is important for group cohesion. Furthermore, by observing how they eat, I have learned the importance of having such moments in the day that can build relationships that underpin better work performance.

## 5. Conclusions and discussions

Feeding is a basic necessity, but commensality or the act of eating together has social effects related to group consolidation and the creation of trusting relationships. As an indicator of familiarity, there is a difference between eating together (even if accompanied by the question "Do you want to taste?") and eating together by sharing all the food. The lunch break naturally brings people together, but the way food is eaten and consumed matters more in terms of cooperation among people.

Considering the individual's need to interact, create relationships, and be perceived as belonging to the group they are part of, we can consider that this way of spending lunch breaks at work will lead to the creation of more united groups, with the definition of common goals and the identification of shared values. All of these can lead to social interaction pressure, but in the long run, they can create a stable team around a core. However, there are fine lines that separate work connections with increased productivity from destructive

connections for the activity they perform. In other words, there is a risk that cleaning staff will spend more time in such interactions and less time actually performing their paid tasks. Eating meals together, in conjunction with work relationships, creates a pleasant work environment and can lead to a higher declarative level of subjective well-being, which implicitly demonstrates teamwork and better results in the activities carried out, as long as all of this is done within dedicated break time.

Sharing food is not an uncommon practice for workers in the cleaning industry. The tendency to eat from the same food, from a common plate, is a practice that is often found in the discourse of workers as well as in the stories of their direct supervisors. This is a common practice in collectivist Asian cultures (Wooley and Fishbach, 2019) and, according to the literature mentioned in the previous section, it brings benefits in terms of cooperation and collaboration. This is certainly not the only way to create cohesion within a group, but it can be considered.

So what does it mean to eat together, with shared food? It can be interpreted symbolically as communion, a group based on customs and consolidated through a practice that involves more than just individual interaction. The practice of sharing what you have translates into behaviour that governs our sociality, with cross-cutting effects on the practice itself. We found that, declaratively, sharing food from the same plate or eating together seems to positively influence employee behaviours, making them feel closer and more cooperative.

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