



Eating at the table, on the couch and in bed: An exploration of different locus of commensality in the discourses of Brazilian working mothers



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ABSTRACT

Background: Commensality is a remarkable human act, and tends to be more present among families. Nevertheless, it is possible that eating at the table is being taken for granted when one refers to family meals. Thus, this paper aims to analyze working mothers' discourses about family meals eaten at the table, on the couch and in the bed/bedroom.

Methods: The participants were thirty mothers working in public universities of the Brazilian region called Baixada Santista. A qualitative study was conducted, using semi-structured interviews. In the transcripts the words "table", "couch", "bed", "bedroom" were located and the excerpts containing them were extracted and analyzed according to a classical and exploratory content analysis.

Results: The table is a significant component of meals that unite the family. While for some the meal at the table is an enjoyable moment, it is a stiff moment for others. Indeed, manners and the notion of hierarchy appeared only for the table. Regarding the couch, it seems that the family chose to eat there, because it is a more casual and relaxed setting. Eating in the bed was related to precarity, intimacy and casualness. In the three settings, watching television was a common practice, replacing or being added to talking.

Conclusions: Commensality is such an important practice that appears in different settings and even in precarity contexts. The table emerged as the maximal cornerstone of commensality. However, when it was not present, new arrangements were made. Especially the couch seems to be a new commensal space, less formal and rigid, but able to allow some collective conviviality. Eating in the bed was a less common practice. Finally, the significant role that television assumed in meals is highlighted.

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1. Introduction

Sharing food is one of the most remarkable acts of human interactions. This act produces social ties and bonding, helps to establish collective identities and transmits ideals and norms (Fischler, 2011; Sobal, 2000; Sobal & Nelson, 2003). In its literal sense, "commensality" means "eating in the same table" (Fischler, 2011). In a broader meaning, commensality can be defined as

"eating food together" or, in other words, "with other people" (Sobal, 2000; Sobal & Nelson, 2003). Oliveira and Casqueiro (2008) also conceptualized it as the ritual constructed around food sharing, which involves pleasure, sociability and communication.

Commensality has been structurally conceptualized as commensal units and circles. Commensal units are the groups of people who meet at a given moment and place in order to eat food together. Since eating with the family seems to be more frequent than eating with any other people, the family tends to be the major commensal unit. Inclusion and exclusion of various commensal units forms commensal circles, which are "networks of relationships that delineate the range of people whom individuals could, have, and do eat with" (Sobal & Nelson, 2003). Most commensal

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circles are composed also by family members (Sobal & Nelson, 2003; Sobal & Hanson, 2014).

Indeed, family meals have been arousing great interest in the scientific literature. Although they may be defined in several different ways, the current concept of a family meal utilized by researchers is generally defined as “those occasions when food is eaten simultaneously in the same location by more than one family member” (Martin-Biggers et al. 2014). Associations between family meal frequency and dietary intake, disordered eating, psychological well-being and body weight are being studied (Fruh, Fulkerson, Mulekar, Kendrick, & Clanton, 2011; Martin-Biggers et al. 2014; Woodruff & Hanning, 2009). Investigating associations between body weight and family meal frequency, Sobal and Hanson (2014) divided family dinners into: food cooked and eaten at home; takeout food eaten at home; food eaten at the homes of relatives or friends; food eaten at a restaurant and food eaten at a fast-food place. These authors affirmed that even with these divisions, it was not possible to access details on the socialization of meals, such as in which room the family ate, sited at a table or not and doing other activities (like watching television) or not. Some studies show that children and adolescents who watch television during meals eat a less healthy diet (Dubois, Farmer, Girard, & Peterson, 2008; Feldman, Eisenberg, Neumark-Sztainer, & Story, 2007). Therefore, many questions in this matter remain underexplored. Visser (2008), analyzing thoroughly the origins and characteristics of table manners, stated that “the idea, which we take for granted, that everyone usually sits around a table to eat is very specific to our own culture”.

Since the space delimited by the table is a social space (Fischler, 2011), it would be interesting to study family meals that occur at this space and at others. Until the limit of our knowledge, no study explored reports and perceptions about eating in different settings, such as the table, the couch and the bed. The importance of this kind of investigation is noteworthy, once that even some dietary guidelines (such as the Brazilian ones, reported by Monteiro et al., 2015) recommends eating with regularity and attention, in company and in appropriate settings. Thus, this paper aims to explore and compare Brazilian working mothers' discourses about family meals eaten at the table, on the couch and in bed/bedroom, with emphasis on family reunion, talking and watching television during meals.

2. Materials and methods

2.1. Study design and sampling

This study is part of a research titled “In their own voices: eating practices of working mothers residents of the Baixada Santista¹”. The primary study aimed to analyze and interpret how working mothers resident in the Baixada Santista perceived, described and narrated their eating practices, placing them in a historical process from their childhood to the present. The “Baixada Santista” is a Brazilian southeast seacoast region, comprising nine very urbanized cities and 1.7 million inhabitants.

The methodological framework of the abovementioned study was oral history (Meihy, 2005; Thompson, 2002). The main outcome of the research was the individual narrative of the life story of each participant. Nonetheless, these narratives had as the main focus the construction of each participant eating practices. The decision of studying mothers was based on the strong socio-cultural role that they have regarding family meals (Sato et al.

2014). The Federal University of São Paulo Ethics Committee approved this study and all participants signed a written and informed consent before their participation.

A qualitative research was performed, in which thirty mothers working in the two public universities of the region (UNIFESP and UNESP) participated. The inclusion criteria were: 1) being a mother; 2) working in one of the two public universities of the region (but not as a professor); 3) not being elder than 65 years old and 4) living in one of the cities of the Baixada Santista. An enrollment was conducted to identify subjects within these criteria and to obtain their respective educational degree. Further, a stratified randomized sampling was conducted, having the educational degree of study as a criterion (until: elementary school completed/high school completed/college completed). A lottery randomly selected thirty women in each educational degree category. Those were contacted and invited to participate in the study. The first ten women who accepted to participate composed the sample of each category. The sample was composed by thirty women (with a response rate of 93.3%), from whom twelve worked in administrative positions, ten were cleaning personnel, five were security guards and three were kitchen maids. Twenty women were born in Southeast Brazil, eight in the Northeast and two in the South. Twelve women contributed the most for the family income, while for seven the husband did so. Eight shared this provision equally with the husband, while three indicated another parent as the main income provider. Regarding the educational level of their fathers, fifteen had until elementary school completed, two had completed high school, one had college degree and twelve did not know this information.

This sample size is similar or superior to previous qualitative studies regarding eating practices of Brazilian women, such as Baião and Deslandes (2010) (n = 26 subjects); Ferreira and Magalhães (2011) (n = 12 subjects) and Rotenberg and De Vargas (2004) (n = 13 subjects).

2.2. Data collection

Semi-structured interviews were performed together by a dietitian and an anthropologist, and each one produced a field diary. A significant bond was created between the interviewers and the participants, who many times acknowledged the researchers for listening to their stories. This bond was also seen when the interviewers revisited the participants to return the transcript conversations, action that generally caused a strong emotional reaction.

The interviews had a guide with open questions, which was pretested. Participants were asked to reflect about their old and current eating practices and, at the same time, about their life courses, styles and changes. The interviewers deeply investigated participants' historical perceptions, cultural and familiar influences, commensal practices, symbols, values and behaviors regarding eating. These topics were selected because they encompass the definition of eating practices proposed by Poulain and Proença (2003), which composed part of the theoretical framework for the primary study that provided the data analyzed here.

The interviews were audio taped and subsequently fully transcribed. The notes taken by the interviewers on the subject's actions (such as crying or laughing) were incorporated in the transcription.

2.3. Data analysis

Given the objective of this paper, the words “table”, “couch”, “bed”, “bedroom”¹ were located all over the transcripts. Excerpts that had these words but with an incongruous context to our aims

¹ In the transcripts of the interviews no other settings for eating, beside table, couch and bed/bedroom, emerged.

(for example: telling about sleeping on the couch) were excluded. The paragraphs that contained those words were extracted from the text (39 paragraphs with the word “table”, 15 with the word “couch” and 5 with the word “bed” or “bedroom”). These were imported to the software MAXQDA version 11, which assisted the analysis. The software helps to attach the codes to the sentences and to retrieve them later. The units of analysis were the sentences within the paragraphs that contained table/couch/bed.

The approach given to text analysis was a mix of deductive and inductive design, starting with more theory-driven investigation and then allowing different themes to emerge from the data. It was performed a classical and an exploratory content analysis. Bernard and Ryan (2010) defined content analysis as “a set of methods for systematically coding and analyzing qualitative data [...] used to explore explicit and covert meanings in text”. Classical content analysis is more deductive and uses codes derived from theory, while exploratory content analysis is more inductive and uses codes derived from data. Initially, the classical content analysis was performed, with the *a priori* themes: “reunion”, “talking” and “watching television”. These themes were selected because there are studies showing that, respectively: 1) eating is a social practice that unites people (Fischler, 2011); 2) mealtime family talk brings psychosocial benefits (Fruh et al., 2011) and 3) eating while watching television increase risk for obesity and unhealthy food intake (Liang, Kuhle, & Veugeliers, 2009). A structured codebook was developed for coding these themes. Following Bernard and Ryan (2010) recommendation, the codebook included, for each theme: short and detailed description; inclusion and exclusion criteria; typical and atypical exemplars and an exemplar categorized as “close but no”. Two coders discussed the codebook and independently applied it to the data set, segmenting sentences. The kappa coefficients for inter-rater reliability were calculated (with the aid of GraphPad QuickCalcs) and then the coders discussed their coding until they reached consensus. The coefficients were 0.89 for the reunion code; 0.88 for the talk code and 0.89 for the TV code, showing a very good reliability. The coding process yielded the following items: 1) the number of segments coded with each theme; 2) a matrix showing the number of segments coded with each theme according to the setting where the meal was taken (bed/bedroom, couch, table); 3) a quote matrix derived from the previously mentioned number matrix. Data from the first two items are fully presented, but since it would not be feasible to present the complete quote matrix, the most typical quotes were selected. To compare the number of segments coded with each theme between the settings where the meal was taken (bed/bedroom, couch, table) a chi-square test as used (with the assistance of the Quantpsy website), adopting p -value ≤ 0.05 as the level of significance. Also according to Bernard and Ryan (2010) recommendations, the *a priori* themes were described considering their core and peripheric aspects, with greater attention to their focus or central tendency, range, distribution and details, and using direct quotes, paraphrases and quantitative information.

Subsequently, an exploratory content analysis was performed. One coder, who had more contact with the study and the data set, read the documents several times, making memos highlighting the most salient aspects. Further, this coder used the cutting and sorting approach to identify themes. Bernard and Ryan (2010) described it as a process that “involves identifying quotes or expressions that seem somehow important – these are called exemplars – and then arranging the quotes/expressions into piles of things that go together”. This was first done with paper, pens and scissors, and then electronically, with the assistance of MAXQDA version 11 for attaching the codes and retrieving the sentences with the same codes or themes. Therefore, the themes came from the most salient aspects of the data, in an inductive approach (Bernard

& Ryan, 2010). It was identified what each quote had in common with the others piled with them, and this common essence was taken as the themes' names. The identified themes were discussed with the other coder and a codebook was developed, in the same format described for the classical content analysis. Likewise, the coders discussed the codebook and independently applied it to the data set, segmenting sentences. The kappa coefficients for inter-rater reliability were calculated (with the aid of GraphPad QuickCalcs) and then the coders discussed their coding until they reached consensus. These kappa coefficients are displayed in Box 1 and they indicated very good reliability. The quantitative data and the themes are, respectively, displayed and described in the same way done for the classical content analysis.

Finally, a tentative model of how the themes were linked to the meal settings was built. In the discussion, a synopsis of the model is presented by thick description and a figure is used to help to visualize the articulations. The model has the purpose of explanation and not prediction.

3. Results

The theme REUNION was present in 22 segments, the theme TALK in 19 segments and the theme TV in 23. Table 1 shows that their distribution significantly varied according to the place where the meal was eaten.

Box 1

Description of the themes that emerged through the exploratory content analysis of the narratives of 30 Brazilian working mothers

| Themes | Definitions | Kappa coefficient ^a | Number of units ^b |
|-----------------|---|--------------------------------|------------------------------|
| REUNION | In order to eat, the family gets together and the participant values this | 0.96 | 22 |
| JUST TALK | Eating food while talking and maintaining a conversation, without doing other activities, such as watching TV | 0.85 | 8 |
| NO TALK | The assertion of no talking while eating | 1.0 | 5 |
| TALK AND TV | Eating food while simultaneously talking (or maintaining a conversation) and watching television. | 0.95 | 11 |
| JUST TV | Eating food while watching television, without talking | 0.94 | 9 |
| INTIMACY | Eating in a different and more intimate way, because the meal is being shared with very close people | 0.87 | 15 |
| PRECARITY | A way of eating that it was caused by precarity, poorness and lack of resources (such as space) | 0.81 | 5 |
| DISSATISFACTION | Dissatisfaction with the way she, her family or people in general are eating, usually (but not always) referring to the past as a better time | 0.89 | 6 |
| HIERARCHY | Any system of persons ranked one above another, with one detaining more privileges regarding eating | 0.93 | 8 |

^a Kappa coefficient for inter-rater reliability between the two coders.
^b Number of segments coded with each theme.

Table 1

Percentage distribution of the themes REUNION, TALK and TV, according to the setting where the meal was eaten, obtained by a classical content analysis of the narratives of 30 Brazilian working mothers*.

| Themes | Settings where the meal was eaten | | |
|---------|-----------------------------------|-------|-------|
| | Bed/bedroom | Couch | Table |
| REUNION | 25.0% | 5.6% | 50.0% |
| TV | 50.0% | 61.1% | 21.0% |
| TALK | 25.0% | 33.3% | 29.0% |

* $\chi^2(4) = 13.4, p = 0.03$.

Although all the discourses analyzed comprised family meals, the theme REUNION was less frequent for the bed/bedroom and the couch than for the table. Excerpts identified with this theme focused on celebrations around the table, as in this quote: “A good environment to eat, ah, the table with the family, like the table of the living room of my house, when we have special occasions: a birthday party, Christmas, and everybody seats at the table, I wish I could have it every day. Then we would be up for calling this a home, you know, a very cozy thing”. The theme’s range encompassed the assertion of how important is eating at the table with the family, as in this example: “I think that the most important moment for a family is the meal at the table, because if you are going to eat in the bedroom or in the living room, what are you going to do? You are going to watch television! You won’t have dinner with your family, you are going to pay attention to the television. But then, at the table is another thing.” Finally, its range also included the expression of joy when the family is gathered around the table, as can be seen in this quote: “What makes me happy is to have my kids reunited at the table”. In the bed/bedroom or the couch, REUNION was identified when the situation was enjoyable, even if it was happening in less than ideal circumstances.

The theme TV was the most common, especially regarding meals eaten on the couch or in the bed/bedroom (Table 1). It was a pervasive theme, present in the three places and with a wide range. It was mainly characterized by families that had TV as their main focus (“We eat and watch television in the living room, because we got used to it ... We sit on the couch and get stuck at the television”), but ranged from those who simultaneously ate, talked and watched television to those for which television was a tempting threat (“We eat in our home, at the table that stays in the kitchen. We have lunch there, except when they [her sons] serve their plates and go always straight to the television”).

The theme TALK was more presented for those who ate on the couch, and secondly at the table (Table 1). It described conversations held by the participants, mainly with their husbands and children, but also with their brothers and mothers. It focused on talking as an everyday practice (“We have breakfast sitting in the table, I get up early to have a calm breakfast ... we talk, she [her daughter] speaks of her work as I speak of mine”), ranging from a talk regarding the food itself to an appreciation of the family talk during meals (“I think it is ‘tudo de bom’² to sit with your family and eat ... talk”). An important aspect is that many excerpts referred participants doing three activities at the same time: eating, talking and watching television (“When we have time we eat together, we sit on the couch when we don’t want to sit at the table ... we stay more on the couch than in the kitchen, where the table is. If we want to chat with each other, we stay on the couch; we are already eating, watching television and talking.”). This may help to understand why this theme was so present for those who ate on the

couch. It also suggests that there is an impressive nearness or overlapping among the TALK and TV themes.

Thus, it seemed a logical choice to detangle some themes and to explore further themes that could emerge from the data. The Box 1 shows the nine themes that emerged from the data with an exploratory content analysis, their definitions, kappa coefficients for inter-rater reliability and the number of segments that were coded with each theme. Table 2 shows the percentage distribution of these new themes according to the setting where the meal was eaten.

The analysis of the theme REUNION was the same as the one performed in the previous analysis. Nonetheless, it is worthy to stress some excerpts that characterized the scenario where reunion happens, showing that this a remarkable social practice: “nobody eats with the common tableware”; “we gathered together where there is a picture of the family”.

Detangling talking and watching television, four themes were identified, in this order of frequency: TALK AND TV (in 11 excerpts); JUST TV (in 9); JUST TALK (in 8) and NO TALK (in 5).

TALK AND TV was very present in the discourses regarding the bed/bedroom and the couch (Table 2). It focused on meals that present an interaction among family members, which comprised watching television and talking. Its range varied a lot among the bed/bedroom and the couch. In the bed/bedroom, participants seemed to search for a particular space; one that is more aligned with their preferences and choices, for example: “We [she and her daughters] grab the plate and go to the bedroom ... because sometimes my husband is watching soccer game [in the living room] and there is a good soap opera ... then the girls come with me to the bedroom, we seat on the floor, watch the soap opera and chat”. On the couch, this arrangement seemed to almost be felt as something natural by the subjects, who described it as an everyday and ordinary practice, as in this excerpt: “Eating with them [mother and brothers] was normal, because it was a routine, we got used to. So it was normal, we turned the television on, ate, talked, discussed”. Regarding the table, there were fewer discourses; some also described this situation as common, while others affirmed that the television stayed turned on during the meal, even if they were talking and not looking directly to it. Television seemed like a background or a white noise, which may indicate that the presence of television during meals is a deeply-rooted practice.

The theme JUST TV was more present in the discourses regarding the couch (Table 2). This fact seems logical, since one of the original functions of the couch can be to sit and watch television. These discourses suggested that the participants remained in the place they frequently stay (because of the television) and the meal migrated to this place. Even so, the food did not carry the

Table 2

Percentage distribution of the themes REUNION, JUST TALK, NO TALK, TALK AND TV, JUST TV, INTIMACY, PRECURITY, DISSATISFACTION and HIERARCHY, according to the setting where the meal was eaten, obtained by an exploratory content analysis of the narratives of 30 Brazilian working mothers*.

| Themes | Settings where the meal was eaten | | |
|-----------------|-----------------------------------|-------|-------|
| | Bed/bedroom | Couch | Table |
| REUNION | 20.0% | 5.6% | 30.0% |
| JUST TALK | 0.0% | 5.6% | 11.7% |
| NO TALK | 0.0% | 0.0% | 8.3% |
| TALK AND TV | 20.0% | 27.7% | 6.7% |
| JUST TV | 10.0% | 27.7% | 5.0% |
| INTIMACY | 30.0% | 16.7% | 15.0% |
| PRECURITY | 20.0% | 11.1% | 1.7% |
| DISSATISFACTION | 0.0% | 5.6% | 8.3% |
| HIERARCHY | 0.0% | 0.0% | 13.3% |

* $\chi^2(16) = 31.9, p = 0.01$.

² “Tudo de bom” is a Brazilian expression that would be literally translated as “everything of good”, which may have a close meaning to “amazing” or “awesome”.

interaction that it usually helps to promote. However, the range of this theme was very narrow in the three places. It focused on the situation that the participant and her families serve themselves and go straight to the television; the main focus was on the television, not in eating, as in this example: “We [she and her daughter] don’t eat at the table, it is rare. We sit on the couch, always on the couch; we put our food on the plate and eat it in front of the TV”.

The theme JUST TALK was mostly observed in the discourses regarding the table (Table 2). It mainly described everyday interactions, which comprised conversations regarding the jobs of the adults, the routines (especially regarding school) of the children and the news that grown-up sons tell. Its range included special occasions where the sons are visiting their mothers, the everyday conversations and the appraisal of this interaction, as in this example: “We [she and her mother] ate all together, seated at the table, talking. In that time, we got along just fine, we had a good conviviality”.

The theme NO TALK indeed emerged from the data and was unexpected. It was found only for the discourses regarding the table (Table 2) and it focused on the idea that talking should not happen during meals. It ranged from a situation where talking was avoided because the meals should be calm to the prohibition of conversations during mealtime, enacted by a person with authority (the father or the mother), including even religious or education (“table manners”) reasons. A typical exemplar would be: “When I have dinner with my daughter we almost don’t talk, because talking while eating was prohibited when I was little. My mother also didn’t talk, because my father didn’t like it. So, at the table it was a mortal silence”.

Another theme that was observed only for the table’s discourses was HIERARCHY (Table 2). Its main focus was determining who should eat at the table, using age as a criterion, as in this example: “The table has only six chairs, so there is no place for everybody. The youngest sit on the ground, I set a coffee table there for them. Thus, the oldest eat at the table and the youngest at the coffee table”. However, its range also included authority figures (the father or the mother) deciding that: 1) everybody should eat together; 2) the meal should be done at the table, away from the television; 3) nobody should talk.

INTIMACY was the second most frequent theme (Box 1), and it appeared more frequently for the discourses regarding the bed/bedroom (Table 2), although it was present in the three settings. It focused in a different way of eating, which is reserved for the very close family members and it is much enjoyed. This theme varied from doing the meal in a simpler way (eating on the couch) to doing it with a special care (eating without hurry, buying fresh bread, using the stove instead of the microwave). It is understandable why this theme was less frequent for the table: it would be rather unusual to invite a guest to eat on couch or in bed; these are places that were most used for meals taken with a rather small number of family members, as in this example: “We eat [she and her daughter] on the couch, but when a guest arrives we set that big table in the living room, we put a table towel. If it is just us, we serve ourselves in the kitchen and then we go to the living room. We could eat at the table, because the table is in the living room, but we eat on the couch when it is just us”. The enjoyment of eating in an intimate way can be seen in this quote: “We [she and her daughter] prepare a sandwich in the kitchen and then we run to the bedroom. I say that our house is my bedroom. Ah, we eat with our backs in the bed, or we put a table towel in the bed and make kind like a picnic, with the television on. And then we play cards too, it is really nice, it is a delight”. Intimate meals at the table were also very appreciated by the participants, primarily due to the pleasure of being with their mothers, brothers, sisters, sons and daughters.

PRECARITY focused mainly in eating on the couch or in bed due

to lack of resources to buy a table or lack of space for accommodating it, which explains the distribution of this theme (Table 2), as in this example: “We eat sitting on the couch, watching television, because we don’t even have a table. There is no place for it, because the house is too small”. The experience of eating in those precarious arrangements (couch or bed) was associated with feelings of confinement and apartness, such as in this quote: “Usually we [she and her daughter] eat in the bedroom, sit at the bed, watching television, making her eat. I don’t go to other places in the house, I don’t like to mingle. When I am eating alone in the house I also go to the bedroom, always ... I go eating and watching television”. Others viewed this arrangement as positive, because even then there were good relations among the family, as in this example: “We were in four brothers ... back then we were all little. We didn’t have a table, so we sat on the bed and ate. We didn’t have anything, we went through a lot. We ate all together in bed, but it was really good, because it was a family thing”. This positive view was also observed for the couch.

The theme DISSATISFACTION was more present for the discourses regarding the table (Table 2). Most of them affirmed that in the past the family gathered around the table and they resent not having it anymore, as it appears in this quote: “We stayed all together at the table. All I know is ... that I don’t have it anymore. I think that food is a family thing and I sometimes can’t reunite my family, so it messes with me”. The theme ranged from criticism about eating alone, on the couch and watching television to dissatisfaction because of lack of resources. The following example presents several of these elements: “The house is small, just a room and a kitchen, so there is no space for a table. I wish I had a table so we could do it all right; everybody together eating at the same time”.

4. Discussion

There is a social construction indicating that a proper or ideal meal should happen with the nuclear family sitting at a table, which is located in a special room of its own, eating home cooked foods (Sobal & Hanson, 2014; Visser, 2008). According to the participants’ discourses, family meals can happen in three settings – table, couch and bed/bedroom – with varied manners and meanings.

Indeed, in some discourses, especially from the theme REUNION, the table is a significant component of meals that unite the family, aggregating meanings. The events that unite the family at table are valued and in one quote, the participant affirms that if this commensality extended to the everyday life, then she would have “a home”.

Here, home seems to be the interaction of several elements: family, meal, table and union. Also in the REUNION theme, special manners regarding tableware and the presence of a family picture in the room were observed just for the table, differentiating it from the others settings, and adding value to it. It was also observed the desire of having a table, in the DISSATISFACTION theme, since the presence of the table and of all family members at the same time would make eating “all right”, i.e., in accordance with a sociocultural values and norms. To Nascimento (2007), eating at the table is indeed a sociocultural value and norm because the table represents several expressions of current sociability, such as love, friendship, power and protectionism.

Others themes reinforced the role of the table at family meals, but with more austerity. The theme NO TALK might indicate rigid manners, encompassing meals that promote commensality (since the family is seated together to eat) but not sociability, since conversations are not allowed. Corroborating this formal character that may involve the family meal at the table, only in this setting the HIERARCHY theme appeared.

An important issue is how the family socializes and entertains itself while eating: does the family talk or watches television or does a little bit of both? This is important because talking promotes sociability, since, according to Visser (2008) “it is one of the ways in which we rise above food”. It implies exchanges of ideas and enjoyment of each other’s company. A survey with 902 American adolescents and their parents reported that most of them agreed with the affirmations “dinner is about more than food; we all talk” and “mealtime is a time for talking with family” (Fulkerson, Neumark-Sztainer, & Story, 2006). It is hypothesized that this communication promoted through meals may even be a protective factor against high-risk behaviors among youth (Fruh et al. 2011; Fulkerson et al. 2006).

The idea that eating watching television and not seating at the table disrupts the family meal is suggested in the REUNION and DISSATISFACTION themes. There was a predominance of watching television instead of talking when the family eats on the couch. Also mostly at the table there was the theme JUST TALK, stressing the role that this place has in family sociability. In the spite of that, the theme TALK AND TV was very present in the three settings. The discourses show that some families seem to manage eating together, watching television and talking during the meal. One study reported that watching television during family meals was associated with fewer intakes of fruits and vegetables (Boutelle, Birnbaum, Lytle, Murry, & Story, 2003). Thus, watching television (or the presence of other distractions, such as talking on phone, texting, using tablets and videogames) and the presence of family talk during meals should be included as variables in studies seeking associations between family meals and other health outcomes.

In most of the categories regarding the couch, it seems that the family chose to eat there, probably because it is a more casual and relaxed setting. Unlike the table, it does not require specific manners and does not establish relations of hierarchy. Visser (2008) emphasizes that the table is the most crucial setting for rigidity. Thus, eating in different settings may reflect a search for less rigid and formal practices. The INTIMACY theme suggests that the couch is preferred for moments of intimacy, while the table is reserved for more formal meals, in the presence of guests. Some elements indicate the practice of commensality while eating on the couch or in bed/bedroom, even when it was a consequence of PRECARITY, and not a choice. Thus, in some cases, the couch and the bed/bedroom seem to be new commensal spaces, less formal and rigid, but still able to allow some collective conviviality.

The discourses regarding eating in the bed/bedroom were scarcer, probably reflecting a less common practice. Certainly, it is hard to imagine a Christmas feast or a birthday party occurring in the bedroom. Nevertheless, this assertive statement does not reflect the multiplicity of the situations observed here. The Brazilian context must be also understood: in poor families, it is common to have three or more generations living in the same house, forming micro nucleus composed by the parents and their sons, which occupies a room as if it was their entire house. This situation can be visualized in the themes INTIMACY and PRECARITY. Although both comprised discourses reporting eating in the bedroom and with the television on, the PRECARITY theme emphasizes the apartness of the micro familiar nucleus and the process of feeding the daughter, without any references of sociability. On the other hand, the INTIMACY theme brings elements of nearness, casualness and fun. One of its quotes shows that the space is adapted and prepared before the meal is served; a table towel is used, as if would be done to set a table. In this theme, it does not seem that each family member is “bowling alone”, a term explored by Putman (2000).

Nevertheless, the “bowling alone” behavior seemed to be present, especially in the theme JUST TV, possibly reflecting some disintegration of the family meals. Sobal (2006) stated that

individualization of eating may arise from the interaction between social relationships and structures, particularly from the family, and may imply in consequences for nutrition and health. Still, regarding nutrition, Sobal and Wansink (2007) analyzed the effect of micro-scale built environments on food intake, considering as micro landscapes the kitchen, the table, the plate and the food. The number, size and saturation of the food vessels displayed at the table, for example, affected food intake, which could have an impact in energy intake, body weight and health. This reinforces the importance of understanding where and how people eat. This paper is a step towards this comprehension. We did not aim to associate the eating setting with diet quality and health outcomes, but certainly, this is an area for further research.

Based on the themes, the following model provides a synopsis about what this sample of Brazilian working mothers said about eating in bed/bedroom, on the couch and at the table. The Fig. 1 explores the model further, dividing the themes into three categories (conditions that preceded the meal, elements that characterized the meal and outcomes of the meal) and showing how much each setting contributed to each theme.

Eating in bed/bedroom seems to be an indicator of precarity, but the characteristics of the room (such as the small space) and what activities are done while eating may lead to feelings of intimacy and reunion. One of these activities is talking even if it is combined with watching television. On the other hand, in some cases the participants just watch television, which may reinforce the feeling of apartness.

Eating on the couch may also reflect precarious conditions and lack of resources. The couch seems to be the place less prone to family gathering around eating. It has an impressive presence of the television, mainly being added to or replacing conversations. Due to these characteristics and the absence of the themes NO TALK and HIERARCHY, the couch seems to be a very casual setting for eating. Nevertheless, this same casualness seems to be a factor of dissatisfaction for some participants.

The table is the most formal place for family meals. It is the only setting where the themes NO TALK and HIERARCHY appeared, reflecting austerity, authority figures and table manners. The table is the setting more prone to family reunion and which had more presences of conversations without the television, indicating that there is more interaction between family members. Still, television is very present, even if the family members are not looking directly at it, which may indicate a firmly embedded practice. Finally, the meals around the table are so valued that its loss or absence leads to dissatisfaction.

The valorization of meals eaten at the table could, however, be related to our group of participants. The investigation of exclusively mothers in this study may be seen as a limitation, since the results represent only one family member’s opinions and values. This study identified relevant themes to explore in researches on family eating, nevertheless the qualitative approach did not allow access how prevalent the practices observed are in a representative population and how they relate to health outcomes (e.g. does eating while watching television and talking affect food consumption?). Thus, we point to the need of future studies with other population groups and approaches that can sum to the knowledge of family commensality.

In conclusion, commensality is an important practice that persists in different settings and even in precarious situations. In this sample, the table emerged as the maximal symbol and cornerstone of commensality. But, when the table was not present, new arrangements were made, whether by choice or not. For instance, several reasons appeared for eating on the couch: not having a table, wanting to watch TV, and choosing it for informality and intimacy. For some participants, the couch or the bed/bedroom

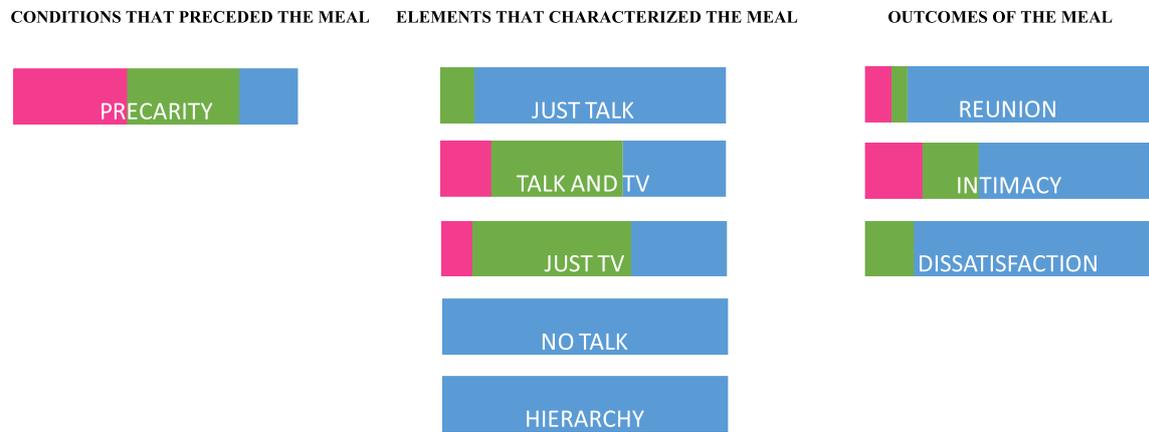


Fig. 1. Model articulating the eating settings (bed/bedroom, couch and table) with the themes obtained by exploratory content analysis of the discourses of thirty Brazilian working mothers*. *To each theme, the pink color represents the percentage contribution of the bed/bedroom, the green color represents the percentage contribution of the couch and the blue represents the percentage contribution of the table. (For interpretation of the references to colour in this figure legend, the reader is referred to the web version of this article).

composed new locus of commensality, where it was possible to eat and enjoy, in several forms, the company of other family members. Nevertheless, it is important to note that watching television appeared as a habitual practice, especially for meals eaten on the couch.

The presented data can be further explored. Semantic analysis, for instance, could be used to better understand relationships among the codes in each meal setting. Future studies may help to elucidate what happens when the television (or other distractions) is on, specially investigating its consequences on conviviality, talking, diet quality and health outcomes. In further researches, both quantitative and qualitative, it may be interesting to untangle the act of eating, studying for every family meal: in which room it occurred, with whom, where they were seated, what they were doing, if they were talking or not and with which utensils they were eating. These researches may stimulate the creation of dietary guidelines that include recommendations towards commensality, such as the new Brazilian Food Guide.

Conflicts of interest

The author do not have conflicts of interest.

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