

Commentary : Consumerism, Portion Distortion and Eating Behavior: Deciphering the 'Fluid Meal' Habits

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Sociology of food has surfaced as a point of sociological inquiry owing to its rapid intersection with various emergent social processes that in turn plays a crucial role in determining What we eat? How we eat? Where we eat? With whom do we eat? In the contemporary times the social influences on food and eating are so much so that the biologically driven 'hunger' dimension has been steadily observed to accommodate the 'appetite' of the individual. Food is no longer treated as an end to satiate the hunger but it is used as a means to it being treated as a 'social facilitator' that is used to create socially constructed notions of identity. The role of culture stands very crucial in directing the entire practice of eating as an essential tool to dramatize society's ideals and aesthetic styles.¹ Civility surrounding food habits are maintained through sharing of those habits not only 'in' but also 'across' cultures in the 'fluid societies. At the backdrop of the consumerist forces how owing to the various operative consumerist forces nothing is able to retain its original shape for long. Fluidity implies inability to retain similar values for long. As we embark on an analysis on food, we try to locate how that fluidity has been attained in the context of food and food choices. Traditionally food has been associated with an important part of identity formation that connected people as part of cultural heritage and national identity which were largely determined by local contexts, caste, religion, availability etc. Increasingly we find that food is being infused with life-style choices and leisure.

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Food and Food choices: The Major Determinants:

R. Shepherd identifies the complexity involved in food choices that cannot restrict itself solely within the ambits of physiology or nutrition but seeks to incorporate dimensions which are social and cultural also. Shepherd argues the importance of the social environment in which an individual is born as well as the social interactions of the individuals having profound effect on their views of food and eating behavior². The various determinants of food choices are enmeshed that largely determine food intake. Following Shepherd, biological, economic, physical, social, psychological and certain attitudes and knowledge about food can be identified as important factors that determine food choices and intake.³ The biological factors include hunger, satiety, appetite, taste or palatability as related to food, while the economic factors are dependent on cost and income. The physical determinants like accessibility, availability, education, knowledge, skills and time constraints all play a decisive role in determining food choices. Furthermore, the social context, socio-economic class and cultural influences are crucial components of the social determinants. Stress, mood along with biases, attitudes and knowledge regarding food all together intermingle in forming a broad framework that determine food and food choices. Shepherd brings forth the issue of *Ambivalence*⁴ to identify that even though people want to eat healthy food but the ambivalence arises when the immediate option of tasty food (even being unhealthy) often clenches the individual's mind. So, the mind moving between physiological options of satiation of nutrition based on healthy food on one hand and the psychological satiation of taste-based unhealthy food puts the individual into an ambivalent position.

Anne Murcott (1998) highlighting on what is meant by food choices argues that it is always better not to differentiate between 'food choices' and 'social influences' as models for studying. Rather she prefers to call both these paradigms together to delineate 'food choices as social'.⁵ Murcott further illustrates that identifying some substances as 'food' and rejecting others is in itself a social act however within the biological and physical regimes. However, history suggests that there has been a number of foods that has not only permeated from 'non-food' to 'food' categories overtime and following Mintz (1985) even though it is the availability that has been a deciding factor that generally makes an item traverse from categories like exotic to the one with increased usage. But the social forces determining increased production can under any circumstances be undermined that makes increased usage and acceptance possible. Cook (1995) highlights the importance of marketing strategies that are involved in popularizing and pushing sales. So, the socio-economic undercurrents determining food and food choices can under no circumstances be overlooked.

Meals, Meal Structure and Eating Behavior:

Eating behavior is also of great sociological importance and are designated as the 'motives and processes which can be associated with diets or eating habits. Even though it might appear as something simple and individual but an interplay of various factors which range from biological and extend up to the psychological, social and cultural realms. An interplay of various factors actually influences not only what we eat, how we eat, how much we eat and with whom we eat. Considering the fluid nature of the social contexts, cultural domains along with the intervention of economic and psychological determinants have taken food and territorially anchored eating behaviors especially in urban, cosmopolitan spaces to scapes beyond compartmentalization. It is increasingly intervened by the social contexts that has undergone a major re-orientation of the earlier eating experiences and habits. Understanding eating behavior stands as a major challenge in face of such changing forces related to food consumption that is a barrier to give shape and retain the eating behaviors for a considerable amount of time. Under such forces eating behavior is constantly changing and channelizing endeavors to map any unilinear relationship between consumption, food availability and eating behavior stands as a major challenge.

Coming to an analysis of 'meals' it is found under direct or indirect discussion focuses since a long-time under the aegis of Sociology and Anthropology. The various studies on dining out have been focusing on factors as 'environment' that have been contributing majorly in structuring 'meal experience over and above the variety or quality of meals (Campbell-Smith, 1967). However later studies have attributed other factors like choice of food, pricing, quality when people actually consider meals outside homes. Looking into the 'multi-method approach', consumer enjoyment and control are seen as impactful factors pulling out people for dining out experiences. The historical curve as identified by many food theorists locate that with the advancement of society and also as embedded in certain religious prescriptions, (like 'gluttony is a sin' as found in Christianity) food quantity is seen to have been controlled emphasizing on quality over quantity. But the curve is not that unilinear as we find even though the control in portion sizes along with focus on presentation and exotic flavors is found in fine dining restaurants but the overall dining out scenario is dominated by 'excesses.

Private meal experiences also have changed considerably if not converged with the public meal habits. Private and public menus as Stephen Mennell (1985) points out have undergone a change in terms of increasing varieties. The private kitchen and the public kitchen have experienced an 'interpenetration'⁶ allowing for more options that the public kitchen offers being made available at the private kitchens. This can be majorly attributed to the development of the entire process of procuring, storing, preserving, marketing and other advancements in technology that initiates in the mind of the consumers that food

experiences of the public domain can be re-iterated at the private kitchen. If we look into the sprawling number of supermarkets across urban as well as sub-urban spaces options, varieties and choices related to food consumption items totally dislocates us from the space-time trajectory. The 'hyper markets' and 'super-markets' not only provides choices of consumption items from across the globe but also offers and discounts lure the consumers in being 'fluid' in terms of such experiential expeditions. Convenience-driven consumerism through ready to eat and cook foods and meals de-structures an individual from their cultural framework that previously was considered as the major determinant of food choices. Discourses surrounding propel an individual urge (largely shared) to make the entire food experience not only diverse beyond one's own cultural periphery but to fluidly consume everything available as part of making meals a 'culinary experience'. If not convergence but of course proliferation of the public food choices is essential experienced in the contemporary times.

Functionality of Meals:

Analyzing the re-orientation of the 'functionality of meals'⁷ we tend to figure out that traditionally meals served firstly, the communal function by demarcating a status differentiation between the donor and the receiver of a meal. Looking deeply into the contemporary food indulgences we locate that 'commercialization of hospitality' has intervened to set-up a status-based meal exchange in regular and as well as on ceremonial basis. Secondly, meals demarcate peripheries to understand with whom one can have food. In context of caste this functionality was manifested in ideas of 'commensalism'. Herein also we find 'status' to have taken a pivotal role in determining with whom one can have food. The previous delineations based on caste; gender have taken a backseat while having meals in public set-ups. Thirdly, the symbolic value attached with food also have undergone a re-orientation. Sharing of one's cultural values through food and meal sharing have been diffused to 'fluid' identities relating to food that offers individuals to slide through other's culture-based food choices as well as experience the global food cultures. Fourthly, role-playing is crucial for meals both for the host and the guest. Standardized and commercialized hospitality while meal sharing brings forth instances when not only guests are treated with food at public settings but also guests are served outside food at the host's private set-up. Thus, the gendered roles pertaining to food procurement, preparation, cooking and serving have all become 'fluid'. Finally, meals are important source of socialization. Whereby children learn food choices, customs, norms, traditions, values, prescriptions and proscriptions pertaining to constitution of meals. These are seen to have been freed from the shackles of the local culture to have been re-oriented to the global one. Children's socialization about meals, eating behaviors and habits have liquidated to incorporate the 'global' and the 'glocal' cuisines and cultures simultaneously.

Mary Douglas in "Deciphering a Meal" (1975) sourced 'meal' and 'drink' as two food categories which differed in aspects like the former being more structured or patterned having specific names, being reserved for a specific circle, having a culturally-specified meaning, timing etc. However, in case of the latter it is more fluid. Following Nicod, traditionally the weekday or the weekend meal is supposed to have some kind of differences. 'The Sunday Lunch' often is most structured in terms of its grandeur. Nicod identified the 'non-reversibility of the archetypical meals'⁸ as one of the most crucial elements of meals. However, in contemporary urban scenarios 'fluidity' is observed as availability and desire driven food choices have emancipated the Sunday lunch as the most sought after one. Both the food categories have somewhat interwoven themselves so much so that such categorizations are observed to have largely failed these days. The characteristics of both the food categories have intertwined and tangled with each other thereby making them as separate and distinct compartments stand as a material impossibility today. Random snacking, introduction of meals and concepts like Brunch, High Tea, All Day Dining have extricated the time dimensions from meals thereby making it highly unstructured. Availability of food and drinks together have somewhat led to the explosion of food categories that previously was used to demarcate between 'kin-circles'. Not only fluidity is observed in meal portions, timings, consumption patterns, varieties and styles and circle groups but also temporality in the set-ups is prevalent through pop-up and cloud kitchens. The consumption-based stripping off of the gap between the extrinsic desire-based want of a specific meal and the immediate intrinsic response to the quenching of the desire is so binding that restricting the desirous meals to conform to the meal structure appears to be non-emancipatory not only for the body but more for the individual mind. Thus, the sharing of the archetypes in terms of weekend meals, timings, memories and circles have all liquidated. So much so that what constitutes a meal have also become diffused and diluted. As having food has elasticized its periphery to increasingly incorporate the leisure and experience dimensions the importance of the restaurants is quite noteworthy for the diner. Joanne Finkelstein (1989) identifies the evolution of restaurants as an institution as measured by virtue of its popularity and the breadth of economic significance. The author recognizes the sociological significance of dining out is amplified by the way it illustrates the individual's participation in the public domain along with the kind of social relationships that are pursued and cultivated. Dining out impacts on the styles of sociality and the expressions of civility which are considered as the most illuminating character of the social epoch.⁹

Eating Habits, Portion and its Distortion:

Coming to quantities, i.e. How much do I eat? We bring in both the discussions on 'portion', 'serving' as well as the concept of 'portion distortion'. A 'portion' is an amount

of food that an individual chooses to have at one time while having a meal based on hunger cues and health goals. Whereas 'serving' refers to a measured amount of food or drink that makes quantification of food possible. 'Portion Distortion' however is an effect that makes one eat more food than what the body needs based on the fact that one is served more food. It can be of two types: one is external (cues) and the other is internal (urge to have food). Portion distortion occurs when there is a mismatch between the externally provided cues supersede the internal urge to eat based on fullness. There has been interest in the study on portion distortion owing to the 1980s onwards era witnessing a huge change in portion sizes that the global forces used to lure consumers largely on the premise that restrictive behavior (in any form) is ideally to be replaced by 'indulgences', that is projected as emancipatory. The relationship between indulgence and portion distortion is dialectical. Even though it is urges of indulgence that might lead to individual stances of portion distortion but the latter becomes the emergent social culture when consumerism led portion distortion compels people to habitually overindulge considering it empowering and engaging. The massive outbreak of super-sized portions, excesses, loaded, big sizes of food items through various discourses and ample availability appeals the consumer's mind as engagement is rewarding over smaller sizes and portions. This leads to the habitual suppression of hunger cues that people fail to decode owing to the excessive and non-escaping engagement of the mind in consumption of the 'simulacra'¹⁰ and symbols of the 'hyperreal'¹¹ world.

The dichotomy occurs when how much we should eat should be determined by our internal drives but what is alarming is to find out how that internal urge is overridden by the externally provided cues that dictate how much we should eat, when, with whom etc. to make the entire act of eating an enjoyable, engaging or rewarding activity or 'experience' in itself. More food makes one prone to eat beyond fullness. The inevitable outcome of it is exposure to various physical and psychological health hazards, life-style generated diseases, high blood pressure, excessive sodium intake etc. In order to balance such hazardous relationship with food and excessive proneness to over consume lead people to practice intermittent fasting, intake of nutritional supplements, engaging in keto and fad diets, counting calories, restrictive diets, being pre-occupied with food, guilt etc. Excessive amount of portion distortion leads to food wastage which directly and indirectly is detrimental to the environment and the ecology. Excessive food wastage by certain sections of people is sharply contrasted by the polar opposite condition of malnutrition that plagues other half of the world. The 'excesses' in terms of food, varieties of food, fun, profit can be juxtaposed with the essence of 'hypermodernity' that catches anything that flows beyond quantities. Anything that promises 'excesses' in itself entices a consumer to an engagement in the act by its sheer means of it being a great source of profit. Engagement in the act of indulgence by itself is considered as

gratifying while stress is induced post-consumption that can probably make a consumer stand at the threshold of the dilemma in between health and illness. But the vicious cycle is very difficult to break through owing to the grappling of the consumerist minds through various and vivid penetration making such compulsions obsessive.

Conclusion:

The major determinants of the biological model of food choice have been increasingly infused with the cultural, social and psychological determinants so much so that the prioritized paradigm deciding food choices have been re-oriented. The food choices steadily move across the social, cultural, psychological grids making the food choices ever 'fluid'. Consumers place optimistic biases while opting for food. The range of these biases are myriad and include options like, health, leisure and enjoyment, indulgence, gratification or even refrainment from food itself. So mindful eating is what that must be engaged in by striking an effective balance between body's fullness and external cues controlling the mind's urges of consumption. A holistic approach must be reverted to in order to determine what to eat or how much to eat. Meals and food choices must be understood as an intersecting factor with age, lifestyle and activity level. Not only structured meal habits have liquidified to random snacking, meals have restructured itself to accommodate fluidity in terms of time, composition and quantity. Greater autonomy in decision making is witnessed when food choices are involved across categories like what is to be considered as food, when to consume, how much, where have increasingly freed itself from the shackles of local and territorial culture to take an increasingly globalized, consumer-oriented pattern. The reckoning between 'portion' and 'serving sizes' both have been totally wrapped by the consumptionist bias. The role of the social influences that not only identifies certain items as food but the involvement of various strategies and discourses in popularizing even to the extent of making consumption compulsive part of diet has turned out to be a very important activity in the contemporary society. The trajectory of such models is ever shifting to keep the cycle of continuous consumption in motion and keep the consumer hooked to this edgy grid of consumption as ever compelling. Disjunction of the cycle of excessive consumption and gratification is necessary in order to overcome the disordered eating behavior that metamorphoses to an anomic relationship people are having with food in the contemporary social scenario.

Notes:

¹ Katz (2003:586)

² Shepherd (1999:807)

³ Shepherd (1999:809)

⁴ Shepherd (1999:810)

⁵ Murcott (1995:732)

⁶ Katz (2003:462)

⁷ Katz (2003:461-462)

⁸ Katz (2003:461-462)

⁹ Finkelstein (1989:25)

¹⁰ Simulacra- Implies copies that depict things which either are devoid of originals or their originals cease to exist now.

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