

Original research

HEALTHY DIMENSION OF A PROPER MEAL: EATING PRACTICES IN ST PETERSBURG¹

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: In the Russian Federation, social studies focus on the general attitude towards a healthy diet as well on the analysis of food content. However, there is a lack of qualitative studies that reveal how people embed healthy eating in everyday life. The article discusses how people reflect on health aspects in determining the concept of a proper dinner and what is considered healthy or unhealthy to eat and whether

ordinary eaters follow the principles of healthy eating in actual life.

Methods: The data and findings are based on empirical research conducted by the authors in 2013 and 2014. The everyday eating practices of inhabitants of St Petersburg were investigated. The data were collected through a survey and in-depth interviews.

Results: The findings show that people identify a proper meal by means of the

food composition, food categories, product qualities, cooking methods, time and regularity, as well as the social environment and health benefits. However, people do not always follow the principles of healthy eating in actual practice.

Conclusion: The study contributes to health research by exploring how health aspects are embedded in everyday eating and the respondents' conception of a proper meal.

Keywords: PROPER MEAL, PROPER DINNER, EATING PRACTICES, INHABITANTS OF ST PETERSBURG

INTRODUCTION

Healthy eating is a problematic issue in the contemporary Russian Federation. The structure of Russians' nutrition still remains unsatisfactory: it consists of a high caloric intake, leading to overweight and obesity and excess consumption of animal fats, sugar and salt. The overconsumption of fats, sugary foods, sausages and bread coexists with the underconsumption of many important foods, such as fish, natural meat and fresh fruit. The eating patterns of the overwhelming majority are unbalanced, incomplete and irregular. Medical researchers report a high level of disease related to unhealthy eating (1-4).

In the current situation of economic crisis, many Russians are moving from natural products to cheaper substitutes to save money. Today, food is the main item of expenditure, and diets are worsening (5). This tendency has a negative impact on the population's health.

Conversely, data of the largest Russian research companies demonstrate that, for a number of Russian consumers, healthy eating is becoming a part of lifestyle (6,4,7-9). According to a Nielsen study, 67% of Russians try to watch their diet to prevent diseases linked to unhealthy eating and 39% follow a particular diet, limiting or prohibiting the intake of certain products or ingredients (9). According to data of the WorkLine Group, the year 2016 saw an unprecedented decline in the consumption of products containing animal protein (for example, meat, sausages, cheese and milk). Over 30% abandoned

¹ Research was conducted with the financial support of the Scandinavian Institutes for Administrative Research.

such products in favour of fruit and vegetables, and about 40% became more attentive in choosing food. For many respondents, the structure of consumption has recently changed in terms of both consuming healthy foods and reducing the consumption of unhealthy foods (such as sugary foods, farinaceous products, sausages, smoked meat and carbonated or strong alcoholic drinks). They also try not to overeat and to adhere to such principles of food behaviour as separate meals, a raw food diet, vegetarianism and so on (10).

The increasing interest in healthy food makes a deeper study of eating practices particularly important since food norms, traditions and habits are embedded in the context of everyday life. In this connection, the term “proper meal” is thought to be an appropriate research tool for understanding how “healthy” attitudes to food are conceptualized. The repertoire of social studies in this field is very limited in the Russian Federation. There is insufficient information on how people deal with proper or healthy eating in actual practice and how they explain their beliefs. Currently, most studies are quantitative and focus on general trends in health and food attitudes or marketing tasks.

Our qualitative study was aimed at exploring how ordinary eaters interpret and apply the idea of eating properly. The respondents came up with several key perspectives regarding the concept of a “proper meal”. However, in this article, we focus primarily on the healthy dimension and describe how it is embedded in everyday eating practices in the example of inhabitants of St Petersburg. It should be mentioned that living in a modern metropolis is highly dynamic, which influences lifestyle changes in a specific way, and results in smaller towns may be different.

The article is based on the results of two studies. The first was a survey that addressed everyday eating practices and some food attitudes (N = 800). The second continued this perspective through 26 in-depth interviews about proper eating.

The results of the studies show how aspects of healthy eating are embedded in the context of a social construct of the meaning of a proper meal. First, we introduce the conceptual frameworks of the studies. Secondly, we describe the research design and methods used. Then the empirical results are presented. Finally,

we draw conclusions and present the contribution of this research.

BACKGROUND

There is a great interest in exploring how modern living impacts eating practices and the changes taking place in everyday life with regard to meals. Some authors consider that, in recent years, the social meaning of the traditional family meal has lost its significance and eating is becoming more non-structured and individualized. Changes and stability in eating habits are eagerly debated among sociologists (30,12-15).

The concept of an eating event is at the core of studying everyday eating practices. The act of eating is discussed as a social event, that is, a structured eating occasion on the basis of a sequence, a combination of several components and the social context. This concept captures different aspects of the eating system and involves three dimensions: eating patterns, the meal format and the social organization of eating (14:40-41). This approach allows for placing food practices in the sociocultural context and for establishing the association between eating, its social organization and everyday life.

A proper meal is a kind of norm, regulating eating practices “as they should be” from the point of view of the nutritional and social content. In sociological literature, a proper meal is commonly considered as an eating event structured according to social and cultural rules (for example, “a hot cooked dinner”). It usually consists of traditional food components. Thus, in British studies a proper meal has been defined as “meat and two veg”, or meat, potatoes and vegetables, constituted from fresh foods (11,17-18). Norms determine the content, acceptable combinations, cooking methods and the appropriate social context. The meal is supposed to be cooked by combining natural (raw) ingredients in a certain way as opposed to snacking or “grazing” and ready-made products (11,19). Similarly, subsequent Nordic studies show the domination of conventional dishes in the description of a proper meal (20-22). The perception of the proper meal is also commonly related to tasty and nutritious home-made food, cooked for the family by a woman at home (11,17-20, 23-24,26-27). It is about eating together and, in this sense, “a metaphor for

family life” (28:204). Thus, the concept of a proper meal relates to the structure and form of the meal as well as its sociability. All in all, a proper meal corresponds to certain cultural rules (norms) and can be viewed from two main perspectives: normative, referring to rules for food content and combinations; and relational, about communication and interaction around food. Both perspectives provide a good analytical framework for studying different social contexts.

The healthy aspect of a proper meal has been emphasized in sociological literature. Charles and Kerr found that most respondents strongly associated a proper meal with a healthy meal (11). Also, fresh and home-made meals were described as healthier than processed or ready-made food. Healthy eating is described in terms of eating specific “proper” meals, that is, meals containing meat, potatoes and vegetables (29). The description of healthy or unhealthy eating in terms of “good” (fresh, natural, unprocessed, home-made) or “bad” (fast, sweet, processed, with additives) foods has also been reported in several studies (31-33). A proper meal, natural food and healthy eating are therefore commonly treated as equivalents and are contrasted with processed, artificial and unhealthy products (34).

In our studies we revealed healthy aspects in the perspective of everyday eating. The first study concerned the everyday eating practices of inhabitants of St Petersburg and their food attitudes and the second the ideas of ordinary eaters in St Petersburg regarding a proper meal. The key points of the studies are presented below.

STUDY 1

EVERYDAY EATING AND FOOD ATTITUDES

In the study aimed at investigating eating practices, the following central questions were addressed: first, how eating as an everyday activity is structured; and secondly, whether contemporary eating patterns differ from traditional ones. The study was based on the case of inhabitants of St Petersburg and Leningrad Region. The data were gathered through structured face-to-face interviews with 800 people representative by age, gender, education, occupation and household type in March 2013. The sample was recruited from the database of the Center for Sociological and Internet Studies of St Petersburg State University and consisted

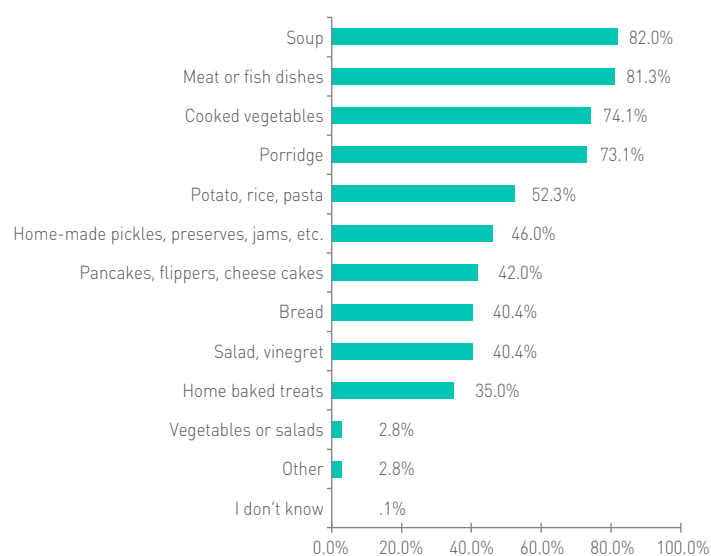
of respondents aged 18–86 years. The sample matches the demographic and socioeconomic structure of the population in the St Petersburg area (35).

Everyday eating was investigated from the point of view of its content, structure, time and place. The questionnaire included questions about eating on the day before the interview and food attitudes. Among others, the set of attitude questions included statements concerning health issues. The respondents were also asked to describe a proper home meal. The data were transformed to Statistical Package for the Social Science (SPSS) files and analysed using the SPSS statistics programme.

The results show fairly stable behavioural patterns in relation to weekday meals. The meal patterns commonly involve three to four meals per day and standard eating hours. People are strongly oriented to hot meals and conventional foods although some changes have occurred. The day is structured around eating events, which take place in a certain sequence and are categorized. The respondents mainly eat traditional foods such as bread, soup, *kasha* or boiled grains, meat, potatoes, pancakes, dumplings, pies and so on. The sequence and content of the meal correspond to commonly accepted rules and follow traditional norms. At the same time, the results reflect some simplification in the meal format and a scarcer content. The meal is mainly consumed at home; eating out occurs quite seldom, even during working hours. The shared family meal continues to play an important role in the social organization of everyday eating.

The most common pattern of everyday eating among the respondents is breakfast, lunch, dinner and supper. It is noteworthy that lunch and dinner are defined as events with a different content. Lunch is a sort of second hearty breakfast and consists of sandwiches, pies, pastries and yogurt, while dinner is a hot meal (93.5%) with several courses. However, the traditional format of a three-course dinner is not common among respondents, who prefer only a main dish or soup and a main dish. Starters and particularly desserts were reported only from time to time. However, the event referred to as dinner remains the main and most complete meal of the day and has the most complex format. While dinner patterns have become more simplified and flexible, eating structured dinners on a regular basis is a common practice.

FIG. 1. PROPER HOME MEALS



In the part of the survey on food attitudes, the respondents were asked to think about an ordinary day at home and to name the home meals that they considered to be proper meals. The answers demonstrate that proper meals are associated with the habitual dishes traditional in the Russian diet: soup, meat and fish dishes, cooked vegetables, *kasha*, potatoes and so on. This demonstrates that cultural norms still have a strong impact on the perception of a proper meal. The results are presented in Figure 1.

Furthermore, the data demonstrate that the respondents are aware of the impact of food on health and are ready to change their eating behaviour: 31.2% consider the risks related to food consumption; 39.7% are concerned about weight; 62.5% are prepared to restrict their diet for health reasons; and 53.1% follow the advice of food experts. At the same time, it was found that the taste and healthiness of the food were equally important to respondents (47.0% and 49.1%, respectively). This shows that taste still motivates consumer choice along with health concerns.

The results of the study show that everyday food consumption is based mostly on stable patterns and concentrated around eating events throughout the day. Dinner is a central event, namely, the principal and most complete meal of the day with a certain structure and organization. In this sense, it is associated with the idea of a proper meal and therefore can be considered as an appropriate basis for determining the meaning of eating properly.

STUDY 2

A PROPER DINNER

The study was aimed at analysing the interpretations of a “proper dinner” in the context of the everyday practices of inhabitants of St Petersburg. The following research questions were put to the respondents: what their dining practices are on weekdays; how they interpret the concept of a proper dinner; what they consider to be proper and improper about their dining; and what the barriers to a proper dinner are. We conducted 26 semi-structured in-depth interviews with “ordinary eaters” in St Petersburg in 2014. The Center for Sociological and Internet Studies of St Petersburg State University supported the interviewing process. The respondents were people of active working age (28–53 years). The same number of men and women were interviewed, 20 of whom lived in families and six were single. Almost all of them (except for two) worked and, for the most part, had fixed working hours.

The respondents were asked about their dining practice on normal weekdays: the dinner time and duration, the number and content of dishes, cooking methods and the social context, as well as recent changes in diet. The respondents were also invited to discuss the concept of a proper dinner.

The respondents primarily perceived a proper meal as a part of lifestyle and the key to good health and overall well-being. Answers included the following: “Proper eating is good health” (male, 50); and “Proper food is healthy food, which does not harm your health [but] enriches you with necessary elements” (female, 32). First, a proper dinner is associated with a certain eating regime and is supposed to be regular: “[To dine] properly? Every day and at the same time” (male, 38); and “Regime is very important for stability, for normal food intake. A punctual regime prevents many problems...” (male, 47). Secondly, the content and balance of a diet are important to the interviewees: “I think it should be a balance: to include proteins, carbohydrates... I consider food from this point of view” (female, 33). Also, a proper dinner should be varied in its content: “All components have to be present in a meal – meat, dairy, salads, fruit, vegetables... for full-value body functioning” (female, 40).

In addition, proper food is supposed to be fresh, natural and cooked in a certain way: “Products should be fresh,

just prepared. Further, it should be natural foods... not boiled sausages but a prepared meat..." (male, 40). For some respondents, meat is essential and makes up the core of a proper diet: "Meat is obligatory because meat protein cannot be substituted" (female, 33). However, some interviewees have doubts about the health benefits of meat and consider not eating it. Fish is mentioned as a proper food but is fairly seldom consumed. Proper food combinations are also important, for example, "green salad with minimal dressing" as a side dish makes it more of a proper meal than, say, fried potatoes or noodles. There is a strong belief that cooking by steaming is healthy, and stewing and boiling are also mentioned as proper cooking methods. A proper dinner is always cooked. In the opinion of the respondents, it is also a hot meal ("First of all, hot"), and "hot liquid" has a particular significance. Most respondents believe that it is soup that makes the meal "dinner in its usual sense". Soup is described as "a healthy and proper meal", "a necessity for the organism" and "good for the stomach".

In the opinion of the interviewees, a proper dinner consists of several courses, that is, it has a complex composition: "My understanding of a proper dinner is soup, a second dish and a drink" (female, 33). At the same time, some respondents prefer a simpler dinner format and consider one dish is enough for repletion. They think that the traditional dinner of three to four courses is too heavy to digest and believe that it is healthier to consume smaller portions and lighter food.

There is a dominant opinion that a proper dinner should be home-made from natural raw ingredients: "It is cooked with love and at home, not bought..." (female, 53). Cooking at home is regarded as a condition for "full-value nutrition", and a proper dinner is a "natural dinner, dinner at home" (male, 50). A proper home-made meal contrasts with an "insufficient meal", that is, ready-made and convenience products, sandwiches and fast food, to which there is a negative attitude: "I think 'proper' is when we cook ourselves and do not buy any ready foods. We have only cooked food, which is eaten immediately" (female, 42). However, the use of convenience food can be justified in some "emergency situations" as "an alternative, when there are no other options. It is not the best choice but is acceptable" (female, 32). All in all, the respondents think that convenience foods are inappropriate for eating at home. Home is mentioned as the most "proper" place for dining: "If possible, it is better to dine at home, even later" (male, 38). Overall, sharing

a meal with family members remains of significant value. However, eating together is problematic on weekdays, and solitary dining has become a dominant practice. The social context of eating is in the process of change: the patterns are more simplified and flexible, and the situational context and individual priorities become significant determinants. There is an opinion that the phenomenon of a shared family meal has disappeared, particularly in metropolises. Family dinners are becoming a special occasion.

Overall, a proper dinner is defined by its food composition (soup and the second dish), food categories (meat, vegetables, fruit), product qualities (fresh, from scratch), cooking methods (home-made, not fried), time and regularity (regular, daily), social environment (home, eating together, quiet atmosphere) and health benefits (nutritional content, balance of components). By contrast, an improper meal is associated with irregular eating, unstructured meals, unhealthy foods (sugary foods, fatty products, fast food, snacks), and the wrong cooking methods (frying). The respondents' statements regarding proper and improper meals are summarized in Table 1.

However, some respondents do not associate a proper dinner with healthy eating. Several have a purely utilitarian approach: "I think there is a need to fill up and that is all...to satisfy hunger. To eat and become stuffed" (female, 49). Also, "proper" can mean pleasure and sensations: "Proper is pleasure from eating" (male, 40); "First of all, it has to be delicious" (male, 35). For those respondents, taste is more important than healthiness: "I prefer the enjoyment. Maybe it is not very healthy but I get pleasure... that is more important for me" (male, 48). In addition, some respondents reported that they had never thought about proper dining and just followed the "needs of the body": "The body feels what it needs... a clear self-regulation" (male, 47). They do not want to change their eating habits.

Proper eating is important but there is a gap between the respondents' beliefs and actual diet. They often eat in a hurry and in unsuitable conditions, buy unhealthy and convenience foods, ignore regular dinner times, indulge their wishes and so on. The following barriers to proper eating were identified:

- lack of financial possibilities: "I think proper eating is just expensive" (female, 48);

TABLE 1. RESPONDENTS' CONCEPTION OF A PROPER AND AN IMPROPER DINNER

Category	Proper	Improper
Time	To dine regularly and slowly	To ignore dinner; eat in a hurry; irregular time of dinner
Composition	2–3 courses or a full main dish; drinking some time before/after dinner	Unstructured (snacks/one plain dish); drinking during dinner, dessert
Content	Traditional simple food, hot and cooked from scratch; well-balanced diet	Fatty, heavy, salted, sweet, convenience food; poor combinations; large quantities
Dishes	Soups, meat/fish, healthy staples, vegetable salads	Lack of soup, mayonnaise-based salads, sandwiches
Products	Fruit and vegetables, meat/fish, buckwheat, fermented dairy products, cereals, cheese, nuts, greens	Frozen foods, sandwiches, macaroni, potato, pastries, sugary foods, spices, sauces
Preparation	Home-made, freshly cooked; steaming, baking, stewing, boiling, grilling	Convenience and fast food; stale food; frying
Environment	Home, quiet atmosphere, pleasant company, cleanness	Fast-food places, unequipped place at work, dirty (dirty dishes, dirty tables); factors distracting from eating

- poor food quality and limited choice: “I am not sure where to buy proper food” (male, 47);
- lack of time: “unbearable work schedule” (female 33); “always on the run” (female 40); “large distances” (female, 53);
- tiredness and unwillingness to cook: “want to have a rest, not to stand at the stove” (male, 40); and
- other barriers, such as: gluttony (“like to eat”), laziness (“laziness stops me”), habit (“used to my diet”), dislike of cooking or lack of cooking skills (“I do not like cooking, simply do not like it”), lack of self-discipline (“to eat properly, you have to organize yourself”), and even philosophical insights (“there is a need to change your life, change yourself...”) (male, 40).

The results of in-depth interviews show that the concept of a proper dinner is interpreted through several dimensions (for example, cultural, social, emotional and so on), where health aspects are key. The respondents describe health aspects in terms of a fixed eating routine, the food content and combinations, the balance and variety of diet, food quality and cooking methods, although some respondents do not associate proper eating with health.

CONCLUSION

As the results of our survey (study 1) demonstrate, most inhabitants of St Petersburg are oriented to the consumption of hot meals, and hot dinners remain an accepted norm of everyday eating. A dinner traditionally consists of several courses. As a rule, it is two main dishes (soup and meat or fish with a garnish). The findings correspond to the results of studies by European sociologists, which emphasize that dinner, in its traditional sense, remains an important daily ritual (14,19–20). It is noteworthy that the perception of existing dining practices is not limited to the components of a proper meal but also embraces the social, cultural and emotional aspects of dinner as a social event.

Home-made dinners are one of the main attributes of a proper meal: about two thirds of the respondents reported having eaten dinner at home the previous evening, that is, they are strongly oriented to dining at home, even on weekdays. This is explained by the fact that eating out has never been popular in general among Russians (1,16,35–37). The majority of the respondents who eat at home prefer cooked food. Thus, a home-made dinner retains its value in a modern-day setting although many people have to dine alone because of work schedules.

The results of our qualitative study (study 2) demonstrate that the notions concerning a proper meal are commonly linked to health. Thus, the respondents draw attention to a balanced diet, the pattern of eating, food safety and health benefits. Our data demonstrate the strong impact of health concerns on the practices of everyday eating. As reported in other studies, the “healthy” motivation determines the growing trend of healthy consumption in today’s Russian Federation. Consumers are becoming more informed and careful about their food choice and diet (10). In recent years, there have been positive changes in the eating structure, and attitudes to food have become more conscious.

The social environment also plays a significant role in the understanding of proper eating. The respondents consider that a pleasant atmosphere, good company and relaxation after work are part of a proper dinner. For those living in families, a proper meal is cooked “with one’s own hands and love”, eaten together with the family, and is a way of building family relationships. For single people, family eating relates to memories of the past. The social context therefore remains important for studying the concept of a proper meal (19-20,23-25,28).

An interesting finding of our research relates to the link between the respondents’ personal characteristics and their attitude to food. Those who think of eating in utilitarian terms describe a proper dinner as just repletion. For “hedonists”, a proper meal is pleasure and taste is more important than healthiness. For “independent” respondents, a proper meal is what they eat and they do not trust expert opinions. For those who care about the time factor, a proper meal is convenience. Sometimes the discussion of a proper meal leads to existential insights. There are also those who have never thought about what a proper meal is. In the future, it could be interesting to develop the concept of a proper meal in connection with personal traits and motivations.

The results of both studies show that modern eating practices in a big city depend on a specific rhythm of life, large distances and higher living requirements. This specific relates to the eating regime (a late dinner), the format (simplification) and the social context (dining alone, at the workplace, accompanied by reading or watching television). Nowadays,

a proper dinner in its traditional sense has become more associated with a weekend meal or special occasions (11,16,28). It is assumed that changes in the social context influence developments in the concept of a proper dinner and are a promising perspective for social research.

According to the results, a proper dinner can be described as a regular midday eating event consisting of several dishes, cooked at home from scratch and preferably hot. It is commonly associated with conventional meals and reproduces certain social and cultural meanings. This supports the results of other studies (11,18-21,26,38). The event referred to as dinner remains the principal and largest meal of the day and has the most complex format in comparison to other eating events.

All in all, the observation of dining practices present scholars with broader opportunities for investigating the healthy aspect of eating as embedded in social life. Our contribution to health studies relates to exploring the aspect of healthy eating in the context of a social construct of the meaning of a proper meal.

The limitation of our findings relates to the fact that this study is characterized by its single case study methodology. We looked at everyday eating practices in a metropolis with its specific social organization. This provides limited opportunity for generalization of the conclusions. Therefore, further comparison with other cases embedded in different social and cultural contexts is needed in order for the results to be more generalized.

Acknowledgements: We want to express our gratitude to Scandinavian Institutes for Administrative Research and the Center for Sociological and Internet Studies of St Petersburg State University for support and help in conducting the studies.

Sources of funding: None.

Conflicts of interest: None declared.

Disclaimer: The authors alone are responsible for the views expressed in this publication and they do not necessarily represent the decisions or policies of World Health Organization.

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