Pleasures and stress of eating alone and eating together among French and German young adults

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Abstract

The presence and the absence of people during meals create pleasures and stress to the eaters. Therefore these positive or negative feelings have an impact on their perception and their appreciation of meals.

The purpose of this paper is to explore the pleasures and the stress of eating alone and eating together among French and German young adults. We focused on this specific age group and on the cultural differences observed between France and Germany.

Negative feelings of eating alone are predominantly known in current literature. Nonetheless, solo eating events also allow positive feelings. Eating with others encourages several activities and situations, which are commonly recognized as sources of pleasure, building the conditions for sociability. However, sharing meals is also stressful for the eaters. These negative feelings may encourage young adults to choose to eat alone from time to time or an adjustment of commensal eating events. Additionally, differences between the French and German young adults have been observed, which could be explained by the attitudes towards food and the eating patterns in these two countries.

These aspects are discussed in the paper thanks to empirical data collected through in-depth interviews with forty-five French and German young adults and participant observations of eating events in Lyon, Paris and Berlin.

Keywords: eating together, eating alone, pleasure, stress, ethnography, cross-cultural.

1. Introduction

During the last decades in western countries, people need to eat alone because of working schedules, distance between workplace and home, living conditions or business travels. In addition, the contemporary food market (a large choice of convenient food offer by catering industry) allows and facilitates the possibility of people eating when-, where- and whatever they want. Today, urban and middle-class people can find in their proximity something to eat at any time of the day and in mostly every place in a city. These phenomena seem to encourage solo eating events in contemporary society and at the same time, the possibility to eat together without eating the same meal content. It is conceivable to suggest that solo eaters[i] and the evolution of the social dimension of eating are important issues for the researchers in social and nutritional sciences and as well as for the professionals of the catering industry.

The act of eating is a paradox. On one hand, eating is an individual act. Every person needs to feed her/his body and eating is a personal matter. On the other hand, the meal seems to constitute the very foundation of social life and is regulated by cultural norms prescribing that and how we eat together (Simmel, 1997). Eating behaviours are structured following sociocultural patterns, which define what, where, when, with whom and how the food should be eaten in a specific group and according to the occasion (Douglas and Nicod, 1974). Commensality, which means eating with others (Sobal and Nelson, 2002), is a central concept in understanding the activity of eating as a social occasion, allowing the integration and the socialization of an individual into a group with its values, representations, norms and structure. Moreover, the evolution during the last decades in the relationship between human beings and food suggests that commensality is a crucial issue for understanding contemporary eating practices in western countries.

Today, several questions should be raised in order to understand commensality: what does eating together involve? What are the differences between shared or solo eating events? Why do people choose to eat together or alone? How do people eat alone and with other people? What consequences have the presence and the absence of people during meals on food consumption? Only few studies investigating these topics exist in current literature. The presence and the absence of people during meals create pleasures and stress to the eaters. Therefore these positive or negative feelings have an impact on the perception and the appreciation of meals.

Negative feelings of eating alone are predominantly known in literature. Nonetheless, the assertions that solo eating events engender also positive feelings and that feelings provoked by the presence or the absence of people during eating events are the result of cultural constructions could not be excluded. Eating with others encourages several activities and situations, which are commonly recognized as sources of pleasure, building the conditions for sociability. However, sharing meals is also stressful. For every social interaction, there are norms, social representations and usages guiding the actions of the participants of the activity and these are culturally defined. Individuals are expected to recognize the situation and to behave in conformity with the conventions. Negative feelings of sociality may encourage individuals to choose eating alone from time to time or an adjustment of commensal eating events to specific lifestyles and societies.

The purpose of this paper is to explore the pleasures and the stress of eating alone and eating together among French and German young adults. The word "pleasure" refers here to positive feelings allowing people to appreciate the social environment of the meal. On the other hand, the word "stress" means here the negative feelings inducing people to dislike it. The research focuses on this specific age group because young adults are reputed to become independent, they have particular living conditions (e.g. small rooms in halls of residence, in shared flat, etc.) and most of them are free of obligations of daily meals with their family. During this life stage, they are particularly concerned by solo eating practices, but also by eating sociability, which means eating with people not living in the same household (Larmet, 2002). So, young adults are an interesting age group to study in order to investigate experiences of solo eating events. At the same time, the company of peers and the importance of friendship and leisure activities in their everyday life admit the existence of sociable occasions around food. This lets us to collect positive and negative experiences of shared meals with peers. Moreover, some young adults still live with their families and the others have just moved outside the family home. Therefore, they would probably go there from time to time or even eat with their family. These aspects give the opportunity to collect experiences including positive and negative feelings of eating with family and with peers.

The phenomena have been investigated in young adults living in two European countries: France and

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[i] Eaters: Fischler (1979) has centred the attention to the eater, formulating in this way the issue of the human eater. He emphasizes that humans incorporate the food consumptions, and these become the eater himself (Poulain, 2002c: 174).

Germany. Comparing stories and observing solo and collective eating events of French and German young adults might allow the identification of elements revealing cultural differences in pleasures and stress provoked by solo or commensal eating events and as well as differences in the attitude towards food between French and German people. The choice to investigate these two countries is based on the results of the cross-cultural survey *Manger* (2008) directed by Claude Fischler and Estelle Masson. The researchers involved in this survey noticed two opposed conceptions of food in the six investigated countries. One of them is a predominantly individual conception of eating, centred on the personal responsibility and the possibility of choice. This attitude is more diffused in the United States, in the United Kingdom and in Germany. In the other conception, eating was perceived as a social act, where the notions of sharing and shared pleasure are central. This attitude is characteristic of France, Italy and the French speaking area of Switzerland. The different conception of eating and sharing food in France and in Germany highlighted in this survey could be symptomatic of the pleasures and the stress of eating alone and eating together in French and German young adults.

In this paper, the pleasures and the stress of eating alone and eating together among young adults and possible cultural differences surrounding them are explored thanks to empirical data composed of forty-five in-depth interviews with French and German young adults and participant observations of eating events in Lyon, Paris and Berlin. The first part of the article introduces the literature surrounding the topic discussed in the paper. The second part presents the design of the study. Then, the empirical data is exposed and discussed. This section is divided into three parts with the aim of showing separately the pleasures and the stress of eating alone, the pleasures and stress of eating together and the cultural differences between the French and German populations identified in this study. In the conclusions, the impact of these positive and negative feelings on the appreciation of meals and their influence on the choice of eating alone or together and on contemporary forms of commensality are discussed.

2. *Theoretical framework*

Several researchers in social sciences have studied the social dimension of eating and underlined the central role of the sharing and the offering of food in the social organisation and the forging of societies (e.g. Durkheim, 1912; Mauss, 1950; Richards, 1932; Robertson-Smith, 1889; Schmitt Pantel, 1992; Simmel, 1997). Anthropological works paid special attention to the meanings and functions of commensality in human societies. These works highlighted that commensality allows communal solidarity, socialization and sociability. Therefore, eating with others allows the maintenance and the establishment of social relations and the social integration of the commensals into a group (Counihan, 2004; Mäkelä, 2000; Julier, 2002; Sobal, 2000). Mealtime is a cultural site for the socialisation of people into members of a society and builds social roles (Appadurai, 1981; Charles and Kerr, 1988; DeVault, 1994; Mars, 1997; Ochs and Shohet, 2006).

During the last decades, researchers in social sciences underlined the emergence of behaviour of "vagabond feeding" in developed countries in opposition to commensality (Fischler, 1979). These forms of behaviours seem to lead the increase and the "destructuration" of food consumption through the practice of grazing and snacking (Fischler, 1979 and 1990; Herpin, 1988; Levenstein, 1988; Rotenberg, 1981; Poulain, 2002a and 2002b). The observation of these trends stimulated the proliferation of studies interested in the social dimension of eating in several fields.

However, some sociologists claim that the evolution of commensality in western countries is not homogenised, because these phenomena do not have the same impact on all socio-demographic profiles and countries (Grignon, 1993). In effect, it is difficult to deny a trend of standardisation, homogenization and individualisation of eating patterns. And at the same tie, the inexistence of influences of cultural heritages on eating patterns cannot be affirmed. There is not enough data to generalize these assertions. Moreover, recent cross-cultural studies showed that attitudes towards food differ from one country to another inducing different behaviour regarding the social dimension of eating (Rozin et al., 1999; Fischler et Masson (Eds.), 2008) and that the evolution of mealtimes and time spent eating do not follow the same rhythms in western countries (De Saint Pol, 2005; Kjaernes (Ed.), 2001; Warde et al., 2007). This data suggests that the importance given to the social dimension of eating evolves over the time and differs between societies.

Some studies suggested that commensality, under specific conditions, might play a beneficial role on health. For example, some researchers underlined the preventive effects of the family meal on obesity and on the consumption of drugs and alcohol (Berlin, 2001; Fitzpatrick et al., 2007; Neumark-Sztainer et al., 2003).

Researchers in the field of experimental psychology observed that the presence of people during eating events influences the quantity of food consumed and the time spent at the table

(Bell and Pliner, 2003; De Castro et al., 1990; De Castro and Brewer, 1992; Herman et al., 2003). Other factors identified as having an impact on the quantity of food consumed when an individual eats in the presence of others are: the relationship he/she has with the commensals - the more familiar are the commensals, the more quantity of food people eat- (Salvy et al., 2007), the body size of the eater (Salvy et al., 2008) and the quantity of food consumed by the companions (Pliner and Bell, 2009).

Researches also revealed that people generally prefer eating with other people to eating alone (Pliner and Bell, 2009). This might be one of the reasons why people spend more time eating in company of other people than alone, as the study of 2006 of Patricia Pliner and her colleagues showed. An explanation of the preference of commensal eating events is that mealtimes are occasions of sociability as many studies emphasized (Counihan, 2004; DeVault, 1992; Julier, 2002; Warde and Martens, 2000). Culturally, people are expected to eat with people and the solitary eater in many cultures engenders suspicion. People may ask why should individuals prefer to deprive themselves of sharing a meal? Why should a person eat alone? Does this person not have friends or family? Today, more and more people have living arrangements and working conditions that force them to eat some meals alone (e.g. Torres et al., 1992). However, the occurrence of solo eating events does not seem to be only a consequence of logistic factors. The existence of people eating alone might be also connected to ideological, medical, aesthetical and religious reasons. For example, in work or school canteens people sometimes could not eat because the offer does not take into account their different diets. In this way, they are excluded or preclude themselves from commensal interactions with colleagues. Sometimes people want to choose whatever and whenever to eat independently of the social environment.

On one hand, a decrease of normative pressures surrounding eating behaviours owing to the social changes in the last forty years cannot be denied (Fischler, 1979; Levenstein, 1988; McIntosh, 1999; Mestdag, 2005; Murcott, 1997). This trend leads to an individualisation of eating practices and maybe a change of the pleasures and stress of eating alone. People have the possibility or the obligation to feed themselves outside their "commensal circle" (Sobal and Nelson, 2003). Therefore, they socialize into a different group environment (such as colleagues or friends) from the other members of their family or in multiple groups with specific codes and values (such as young adults, who eat in company of peers and as well as of family). On the other hand, it is not possible to exclude the emergence of new forms of sharing food and table rituals owing to the emergence of new forms of sociability in contemporary society, new leisure practices and the evolution of the catering industry's offer as recent studies pointed out (Corbeau and Poulain, 2002; Julier, 2002; Warde and Martens, 2000).

3. Methodological framework

This research used an ethnographic and cross-cultural approach. The choice of a qualitative methodology is based on the possibility of describing eating practices and social representations surrounding the meanings and the feelings of solo and commensal eating events. The choice of an international comparison is connected to the aim of exploring if the positive and negative feelings of eating alone and eating together were related with specific cultural patterns, as the survey edited by Fischler and Masson (2008) suggested. Differences regarding these aspects could highlight cultural differences around attitudes towards food and eating patterns in France and Germany.

The fieldwork took place in 2009 and 2010 in Lyon, Paris and Berlin. Data was collected using in-depth interviews and participant observations. Forty-five interviews were conducted with young adults in France and Germany, twenty-two in France and twenty-three in Germany. The social profiles of the interviewed young adults were heterogeneous: aged from 18 to 28 years old; 24 girls and 21 boys; 16 salaried and 29 students; 21 living in shared flat, 9 living alone, 8 living with their partner and 7 with family. The interviews lasted between forty-five minutes and two hours and have been totally transcribed. In France, snowball recruitment was used, which means that the recruitment started through the social networks of the researcher and the person met for the interview gave her other contacts and so on. In Berlin, in addition to the snowball recruitment, some posters were hung in the universities and people encountered in parks and in universities were solicited to participate in an interview. This additional way of recruiting participants is related to the importance of differentiating the sample and it was not possible to do it with the limited social network of the researcher in Germany. Interviews with people who were asked to participate were not done at the moment of the recruitment. An appointment was fixed in order to take the time to discuss as well as for the people recruited thanks to snowball recruitment.

The choice to diversify the sample was important for several reasons. First from an anthropological insight, it is crucial to meet and discuss with

various profiles of people in order to understand what is specific to a culture and not only to a particular social group. It is also possible to reveal specificities by comparing homogeneous samples in the two countries, as other researchers have chosen for their international comparison (e.g. Pfirsch, 1997). Nevertheless, in the case that there are several similarities between the two samples, how is it possible to affirm that they are linked to the inexistence of cultural differences and do not depend on the similar lifestyle of specific social groups? Moreover, a comparative study helped us to understand if national eating practices and culture are replaced by a global culture or if globalization is integrated in a different way into existing national traditions (Bildtgård, 2010; Sanchez, 2007; Traphagan and Brown, 2002), and also if the food has a central role in the national identity in different countries or if it is a matter of class distinction (Shields-Argelès, 2008).

In this paper, the variety of the encountered people is relevant because illustrates that several profiles of people have to eat alone in everyday life and for different reasons linked to social conditions (e.g. living alone, working with older people, not rigid schedule, etc.) and all these people are also prone to the constraints of social or unsociable aspects of eating events. In addition, the variety of profiles helps first of all to have an overview of the feelings of eating alone and eating together, and then to notice if some groups are more exposed to stress or pleasures of eating alone and eating together. Differences in social practices are also meaningful of specific cultures and so these practices are the culture itself. This allows us to underline how these feelings are cultural constructions.

The interviews were conducted in French in France and in English in Germany. In Germany, the researcher did not feel enough confortable with German in order to conduct in-depth interviews. In addition, she preferred interviewing people alone than in the presence of one interpret. However, the researcher told to German young adults that she could ask one interpret to join them if they did not feel enough confortable with English. Finally, they were all agrees to participate at the interview in English. Despite this, most of the informants used German words and expressions sometimes. This was the case when they did not know the right translation in English and when it was important for them to keep the German version in order to express themselves precisely.

People during interviews were asked to speak about the role of food in their life, their everyday and festive eating habits, the differences observed in their eating habits over a period of time or according to social situations (e.g. leaving family home, starting to work, etc.), their impressions of local eating practices and their experience in the case of a long period abroad, their ideal meal and the practice of eating alone and with people. Pleasures and stress related to the presence and the absence of people during eating events appeared repeatedly during the interviews.

The researcher observed young adults in several eating events with the aim of identifying what, where, with whom and how young adults eat. The immersion in the eating practices of young adults helps her to identify the reasons of stress related to the practice of eating together and also the positive aspects, which allow young adults to build sociability. Young adults sometimes spoke about positive elements of meals or argued about several aspects directly or indirectly related to the food sharing during the organisation of meals, at the table or during other leisure activities with friends (e.g. who will do this or that task, why they did not like that place or that dinner, etc.).

So, by spending time with informants not only during interviews, it was possible to collect information concerning the pleasure and stress of eating alone or together. Observations helped the researcher to discover aspects that were not necessarily verbalized during interviews, to detect possible questions for the interviews and to a better interpretation of the discourses of the informants.

4. Results and Discussion

▪ 4.1. Stress and pleasures of eating alone

One main aspect that young adults expressed concerning negative feelings of eating alone is the fear of the judgement that other people could have about them when they are eating alone in a public place. For example, an informant said that he did not go eating alone to the university restaurant because he does not want to be judged as a person "*without friends*"[II] (French young man, 21 years old). Another example is when the interviewer asked a girl if she sometimes went to the university canteen when she is alone, and she answered:

Informant: *"No, never, never, I've never gone on my own (she laughs)!"*
Interviewer: *"I've seen a lot of people eating alone in the Mensa (university canteen)…"*
Informant: *"I know, I know, but I'm not like that at all, I choose to not go to the Mensa if I have to go on my own"* (German young woman, 19 years old).

[II] All the extracts of the interviews with French young people cited in the article have been translated into English by the author.

Many informants in this study also said they felt pity and sadness for people eating alone in canteens or restaurants. Some of them never had tried this kind of experience and they would not really try it. For example, an informant told:
"I do not really like eating alone (she smiles). I always had an image of people… You know, these people that eat alone at the restaurant at lunch, they are too sad!" (French young woman, 24 years old).

This kind of experience was perceived as a kind of test. For example, an informant speaking about the first times she went to the canteen alone, said:
"Yes, it's special (she laughs), I threw myself into this adventure, too bad, I did not have enough time to go to my flat, but it's true that you feel, it's strange, because all the people eat together, you arrive, you have a place alone and then, even the people… If you meet some friends when you are leaving, they say to you 'Ah! But have you eaten alone? It's sad!'" (French young woman, 22 years old).

So, negative feelings of solo eating impose the choice of specific contexts and eating manners, in which the solo eater is not prone to be judged by other people. It seems that there are places and ways of eating which are more adapted for solo eating events. For example, some informants said they preferred eating a sandwich or fast food while engaging in other activities or going to eat at home when they are alone.
"I prefer almost going… if I am alone, I go buy my sandwich and I go shopping or something, but I never eat at the university canteen alone!" (French young woman, 24 years old).

Stories of the informants illustrate that when they eat alone, they perceive they are eating in a worse way, such as uncooked food, without conventional table manners, faster, etc. They eat food, which is not cooked or convenience food, as this informant said: "*When I was living alone, I ate many pre-prepared dishes and sandwiches*" (French young woman, 23 years old).

In effect, informants underlined that they are not used to cooking just for themselves, because they do not have the motivation. For example, informants said: "*It is true that meals alone, I do not like them too much, I need to find the motivation to cook*" (French young man, 23 years old) or "*That was one of the things that I hated the most when I was living on my own: just cooking for myself and then sitting there*" (German young woman, 26 years old).

Other people highlighted the bad and unpleasant way of eating when they are alone, which can be seen in their representations: standing, picking up food, and fast.
"*When there is no one, I think that I can eat standing up and pass by the dish many times, and take what is there*" (French young man, 24 years old).

"*If I am together with other people, sure it takes more time, if I am alone, it's very fast, I cook and I eat in 10 minutes*" (German young man, 22 years old).

"I eat quickly at home. Or you are at restaurants with friends and you discuss, but when you are alone at home, the meal it's really quick, in half an hour its is done" (French young man, 22 years old).

The negative feelings of eating alone emerged in this study are intensely linked to the imagination of solitary eaters in the specific culture of the informants. As Pliner and Bell highlighted (2009:184-185), commensal eating is deeply embedded in cultural consciousness and eating alone is an anomalous behaviour. In writers' and philosophers' texts, Bell and Pliner (2009: 174) identified that eating alone is not a good thing for three reasons: it is uncivilized, unpleasant and pathetic. A solo diner is more likely to arouse curiosity or even pity, more likely to feel conspicuous (Bruni 2006 in Jonsonn and Pipping Ekström, 2009: 244). There are a large number of solitary customers for whom lone dining is not as easy as they would like it to be (Jonsonn and Pipping Ekström, 2009).
Moreover, the negative feelings provoked by solo eating show how this situation is undesirable. The lack of motivation of having a "proper" meal and cooking when people are alone observed in this study is related to results of other researches, which revealed that eating alone is associated with poor nutrition (e.g. Davis et al., 1990 and Bell and Marshall, 2003 in Pliner and Bell, 2009: 184).
Nonetheless, eating alone does not create only negative feelings to the eaters. Informants also talked about some pleasures that they can have when they eat alone. The same individual might feel positive or negative feelings by eating alone or together depending in the context, her/his mood, etc. Several people underlined the possibility of being more relaxed when they eat alone and having a moment just for themselves. For example, informants said: "*If I'm really hungry and it has been a stressful day, I like sitting down, quietly, eating my food and not talking to anyone*" (German young man, 23 years old) or "*Sometimes it makes you feel good to eat alone, you do not want to discuss, you do not want to see anyone,*

you just want to be quiet" (French young man, 22 years old).

Other people highlighted the opportunity to pay more attention to food than to conversation while eating alone. One main aspect of the pleasure of solo eating events was related to the possibility of having freedom of food choice and rhythms. This aspect was not directly expressed, but several recurring elements led to believe that freedom is a key point for understanding intentional solo eating events. For example, informants exteriorised their obligation of daily adaptations in order to eat with their partner or flatmates and the pleasure they feel when they can eat without compromises about what food to eat, when and how to eat it with their commensal. Several young adults emphasized the necessity to adapt the food preferences and special diets of everyone in order to eat together. For example, when the interviewer asked an informant if she ate with her girlfriends, she said:

Informant: "It's rare that we eat on our own."
Interviewer: "And do you eat the same things all the time?"
Informant: "No, we do not eat the same things all the time, but it's true that she… How to explain this? The simple things, always the same, it does not disturb her, it's not mean, but it's true, while me, I like changing" (French young woman, 23 years old).

Another informant highlighted the obligation to eat in places that you would not if you are eating alone:

"I do not like eating alone. Nevertheless when eating in group, there is a constraint, which is for example, some people like to go, I don't know… To that sandwich place that I don't like at all. Yes, I go because it is a meal in a group, it's funny, but it's true that when you eat alone, you can also do what you like" (French young man, 20 years old).

The budget and the amount of time that people would like to assign to food was also one element inducing young adults to prefer eating alone to eating with flatmates or with colleagues that do not give the same importance to food. For example, one informant talked about the problem, which cropped up in his flat share:

"We had to organize food in a different way to what we imagined, because P. is a bit… He eats… Because there is P. who eats like a horse, he does not take time to prepare the food well, he tries to eat balanced, but, yes, he does not have the same expectations, it's not… Food has less importance in his life and I think, it's especially a question of money, we tried for 3 or 4 months and he thought that it was too expensive to eat with us, so he

decided to do it alone" (French young man, 25 years old).

In addition, young adults seem to appreciate the possibility of eating when they are hungry so they do not have to wait always for conventional mealtimes or for their work-, school-, flat mates to be hungry. For example, several informants highlighted the different time schedules of their flatmates, which do not allow to them to share meals, even if they would like to do it.

Apparently, when people eat alone, they do not have to compromise between their individual desires, the desires of their companions or social conventions. They have the opportunity to eat whatever and whenever they want. Therefore, pleasures of eating alone reveal that there are negative aspects of sociality. Eating with others forces people to be involved in a conversation or to make negotiations and adaptations. From time to time, eating alone is a source of pleasure allowing the satisfaction of individual needs and personal desires. Hypothetically, these points are symptomatic of this life stage, when people become free of several obligations concerning meals with the family. So, they do not have the desire to get involved in the same daily, restrictive and authoritarian social relationships, such as these informants underlined:

"It's when I'm really hungry and I'm in a bad mood if I do not eat (he laughs), and there is no one… Sometimes it could be as well a pleasure to eat alone, because I do not have too much of a fixed schedule, I try not to come home every day at the same hour and to have a rhythm. I try to not have this, because it is a symbol of routine. When I was younger, until… I don't know… 13 years old, I had established hours for meals, because my parents eat, yes the summer it was a bit more relaxed, but…" (French young man, 25 years old).

"The second WG (flat share) was a problem, because he (her flatmate) really wanted to eat together and he was always cooking for us and he was really nice and gentle. But for him it was also important that we ate with him and for me it was like at home with my mom: "I make food and you have to eat it!" and we had a long argument about that and then, this combination was like that again like this and for me it was problematic, because "I need to have my own time when I eat, I like eating with you, but when I do not want to, you can't get angry about that!" (German young woman, 26 years old).

In addition, it is possible to assume that young adults in their relationships with peers are faced with a large variety of food habits and practices, because for example people living together in a

shared flat may not come from the same sociocultural environment. They may come from different regions or countries or they may have different religions, etc. It is not easy to arrange everyone to find a common mealtime and meal content, when they have different cultural patterns or when they may not perceive the people with whom they live as a community and they do not want to build the feeling of community through eating together.

▪ **4.2. Pleasures andstress of eating together**

Eating together with peers is a source of pleasure among young adults. The word that mostly occurs when people speak about pleasant occasions, in which they join people to eat, is conviviality for French people and several adjectives for German people, such as funny. In these two citations is possible to read the use of the term conviviality: "*It is important for me that there are moments of conviviality*" (French young woman, 25 years old) or "*We had a convivial meal*" (French young woman, 23 years old).
So, convivial is the most specific word to describe pleasant meals. This is especially true for the French informants, because the word in French is currently used. But what does conviviality mean? Trying to distinguish in the interviews what were the elements characterising convivial meals among young adults, it was possible to identify several aspects. Eating with others is mostly interacting with them. Social interactions allow people to spend a pleasant time together. Communication is certainly an important element of convivial meals.
These interactions are constituted mostly of verbal communication, as it is possible to read in these citations:
"We sit there or in the kitchen and we talk, we take our time to eat, to…Yes, to discuss, to talk about the day, it's a time of relaxation" (French young man, 25 years old).

"We stay at the table maybe 2 hours and then, even if we have finished eating, we all stay there discussing, yes. The aim of a meal…It's really a place where you gather everyone, everyone is around, you really make a circle and then we discuss, we take the time" (French young woman, 23 years old).

However, eating and discussing are not the only activities that young adults do when they meet friends for a meal. It is also possible to laugh and do other communal activities, such as playing table games or watching a film before, during or after the meal.

"I like inviting friends at home because I can cook, and this allows us to spend more time all together and there is the possibility to do other things, to play games, to listen to music" (French young woman, 23 years old).

"I like it when we are watching a movie or doing… Like playing a game, or something like that when we are eating" (German young woman, 20 years old).

"*With friends the food is less important, but the conviviality is more important*" (French young woman, 23 years old). This citation highlights that food is not the most important aspect in order to create an ambiance allowing the appreciation of the meal. A failed eating occasion with friends seems to be more connected to the lack of ambiance than to bad food. Even if nice food helps to create a good environment, bad food does not mean that people do not share a convivial occasion. This is especially true in the case of invitations of friends for meals at home, when young adults do not really expect that the food is superb.
Young adults have pleasures when they eat with other people for several other reasons. First, when people eat together, they spend more time eating and this is perceived in a positive way, and on the contrary they perceive eating fast as a bad way of eating.
"*In France we like to spend time eating and when there are friends it is funnier*" (French young woman, 25 years old).

Eating together is also an occasion to discover new dishes. Young adults may discover new food because they go to a place suggested by other people. They go to restaurants and they can try food from their friends' dishes or they order several dishes to share with them in order to taste different things. When they go to eat in someone's home, the host might prepare some food that the guest is not used to eating and so, it is an occasion for discovering new tastes and recipes.
"*If they invite me, it does not disturb me to go to a place where I do not usually go, on the contrary this introduces me to new things*" (French young woman, 23 years old).

"Everyone cooks once, something typical" (German young man, 22 years old).

"If I go to a restaurant, well…as Italian, but also whatever people suggest to me, I like to try new things, new food" (German young woman, 27 years old).

Another aspect is that young adults prefer cooking for or with other people than just for themselves. For example, informants said: "*I like cooking for friends, because I like to give them pleasure*" (French young woman, 23 years old), "*It is a special kind of cooking, it is a kind of being together. It is not only the task or the activity of cooking, but it is also talking about the day and listening to music while cooking*" (German young man, 27 years old) or "*I like, if we are at home, I really like when we cook together and also I like chopping the stuff together*" (German young man, 24 years old).

The sociologist Mäkelä highlighted that the sociability of shared meals could lie also in the preparation and not only in the consumption. "Preparing meals is an essential part of the social organisation and the sociability of meals. (…) The preparation of meals from scratch gets new meanings. (…) Preparing food can be a joint event where hosts and guests cook together (…). The shared event of meal preparation extends the sociability of eating together to cooking together." (Mäkelä, 2009: 44).

As literature underlined, people prefer to eat in the presence of other people and mealtimes are occasions of sociability. Eating with others should be a sociable occasion. However, during interviews people speak also about stress that eating with other people generates. These feelings are strongly related to the pleasures they can feel when eating alone (that were outlined here previously), such as the obligation to communicate and the obligation to adapt their own desires to the desires of the other commensals.

Young adults do not feel judged only when they eat alone in places where people can see them, but they feel judged as well by their companions. This fear is especially present in people following a special diet or who do not eat a large variety of food. For example, an informant told me about the problems that she has with her girlfriend:

"*I am a bit complicated with food, so for her this could make problems. Because I do not eat fish, and things like that, I do not like it too much. So, from time to time, she said that I am a bit complicated, because she likes almost everything*" (French young woman, 25 years old).

When young adults are invited to a friend's home for dinner or when they invite friends for a meal, they could be stressed. The host may be scared to the point of failing the dish.

"*The only thing that I like when I am cooking alone is basically that I can cook whatever I want, because if I cook for myself something that tastes terrible, I'm not judged, I can see by myself that it is not good*" (German young man, 19 years old).

When young adults are guests, they may feel stressed if they do not like the food offered to them. On one hand, they do not want to offend the host who made an effort to prepare a meal and took care that everyone would enjoy it. On the other hand, they feel bad about eating what they do not like. As the person caring to feed the individuals of his household, the host should care for the food preferences of the guests. Other works interested in the activity of feeding family or guests highlighted that part of this work potentially consists of giving this kind of individual attention (DeVault, 1994), in order to make guests comfortable and in this way creating the opportunity for a sociable occasion (Julier, 2002). In return, the guest is expected to appreciate and to compliment the host.

Another aspect that may provoke negative feelings is the obligation to find topics of discussion in order to avoid silence, but at the same time they have to interest everyone at the table. Long moments of silence and some kind of topics of conversation during meals provoke embarrassment or boredom.

"*My friends at the university, but they were not really intimate friends, they were university colleagues. So, the meals were really go and eat and they were not, not really to discuss*" (French young woman, 21 years old).

"*In the second WG (flat share) it was like they are talking about some political stuff and blah, blah, blah, blah, I'm not so interested, like I'm interested in politics, but when I feel like you talk about it because you have to talk about it, I think, I'm bored (she laughs), but now I enjoy the time with my present flat mates, I enjoy the discussion, the kind of conversation*" (German young woman, 25 years old).

"*What I like is when we can discuss, when you stay a long time at the restaurant, it's nice when you can discuss with people, you have fun, you laugh. If you cannot really talk, you get bored in a while*" (French young man, 22 years old).

Finally, rigid norms and formal manners are also a source of stress for young adults. In order to feel confortable and relaxed during eating occasions, young adults prefer a low degree of formality and a high degree of intimacy. They are afraid of formal manners regulating the interactions between the commensal people and allowing rules and roles to be clearly defined.

Stressful situations underlined by the informants are heightened for those in which they have to eat with unknown people or with people having a superior social position. Some informants have defined eating as an intimate act. One of them for

example said: "*Eating is like showing yourself naked*" (French young woman, 24 years old). This is probably why it is strongly related to the judgement that other people would have about them. The intimacy already existing between commensals allows people to not feel judged and uncomfortable, but it also allows them to express negative feelings. As Julier said: "Comfort becomes the staging for greater intimacy among people" and it "implies a degree of intimacy that usually needs to be negotiated" (Julier, 2002: 47 and 51). Prescript behaviours could be perceived as appropriate or oppressive according to the degree of intimacy between commensal people (Julier, 2002: 51).

- ### 4.3. Cultural differences in pleasures and stress related to the social dimension of eating

Even if several similarities between the two populations investigated have been observed, eating alone or eating with others are not liked or disliked always for the same reasons among French and German young adults. This part of the article will show some of the differences noticed in the two countries.

Eating alone was perceived mostly as a source of stress among the French population. They feared that people could have a wrong impression about them if they were eating alone. Even if it could be difficult to find an arrangement in order to eat together and to eat the same meal content, several of the French young adults try to match their schedule with the schedule of their flatmates or their colleagues and also to make an agreement to share the meal. This involves an adaptation between individual desires and social constraints, which consists of having more rigid mealtimes and making compromises on what is eaten. For example, in a citation showed before, a French young adult was disappointed that finally after having tried for few months, it was impossible to find an arrangement to eat together with his flatmates. Another example comes from the informant who claimed that when he is eating in a group, if he cannot choose where and what to eat, it does not matter, because he knows that it will be funnier to do it with others than alone.

The meal is a crucial time to gather people together in France and eating is considered a central activity, where sociability is built.

"*The meal is a bit like the only time when people can discuss and now it does not exist too much, because people eat how they want, when they want, what they want*" (French young woman, 25 years old).

"*It's not really going out with friends, it's more like having a tiny intimate evenings and eating together, it's certain that this allows us to spend a nice evening, because if we meet each other only to spend the evening it's a bit monotonous. Here we know that we can eat, I like that, I know that if I have friends, I like cooking for them, preparing some dishes for them, that gives me pleasure*" (French young woman, 21 years old).

Moreover, in the French population, it was possible to notice that young adults need to make a big effort in order to motivate themselves for cooking a meal that will be consumed alone. Eating alone was perceived as the worst kind of eating, such as eating quicker, uncooked food or eating while doing other activities. It is as if eating without people was not really eating or having a meal, but it is more like feeding the body. In a study conducted in United States, the ability to engage in other activities was a positive aspect of solo eating (Pliner and Bell, 2009: 174). On the contrary, in France doing other things while eating, with the exception of conversation, is perceived as a negative aspect. In addition, in France cooking is an activity that people perceive as something that you do for other people and not only for yourself. Prepared food should be shared. The "proper" meal is a social occasion.

On the contrary, many of the German informants do not have a problem with cooking just for themselves. Some German informants said that they are more stressed when they have to cook alone for several people without anybody's help than when they have to cook just for themselves. For example, German young adults said: "*I also cook something for myself sometimes that takes a lot of time, for example Gulash or Rulladen*" (German young man, 19 years old).

Several German young adults declared they enjoyed cooking together more than cooking alone. The pleasure of eating together seems to be related to the enjoyment of sharing an activity with other people. Eating does not seem to be a crucial leisure activity as in France. However, between German young adults there are several other activities, which are done in order to get in touch with people. Cooking was one of these activities. "*I like it if you don't know the people so well that you are living with, cooking is also a good way to get to know each other, to communicate*" (German young woman, 25 years old).

They enjoy sharing the task of cooking, because they like choosing together what to prepare, learning how to cook other dishes and creating something with the ingredients that other people have brought. For example, informants said about cooking meals with friends:

"I really like that… To do things together, to prepare the food together, to talk while doing this, it's like a social activity" (German young man, 22 years old).

"I mean cooking together is funny, people stand around, drink wine, some people are working, chopping things, others are talking, chatting, it's better than when you work on your own" (German young man, 23 years old).

"Everybody brings something, we don't talk before about what we are cooking, but everybody brings something and then there is always a good… enough. And we always fit together, and we decide then what we cook together" (German young woman, 28 years old).

No one of the French population spoke about this pleasure. The only person who spoke about cooking together underlined that cooking together is for her a source of conflict between cookers and it is not a convivial moment.
"I like to do it my way. Cooking for me is a time to be quiet, you do something and before starting you have an idea about how you will do it, so if you do it with many people it goes "Ah but yes, if I were you I would do it like this", I do not like it, it is a pity because it could be convivial to cook together" (French young woman, 22 years old).

This does not mean that the practice of cooking together or side by side among French young adults does not exist. However, this practice was not valorised in their discourses as something convivial or as an essentially part of the pleasure of inviting and gathering people for eating. On the contrary, for most of the German young adults met during this research, the possibility to cook together was expressed as one main element of meal sociability.

Many of the interviewed German young adults do not have the same concerns regarding solo eating events. An important aspect repeatedly underlined in the discourses of German young adults was the importance of eating following their rhythms instead of social conventions in order to eat when they are hungry and not because it is an established hour where they are expected to have lunch or dinner or to wait for the other people. Some of the young adults encountered in Berlin, even if they live in a shared flat, tend to not share food and for several reasons, they prefer to manage their food individually. So, even if sometimes they eat at the same time as their flatmates, everyone may cook their own food. It is also possible that if they share food shopping, which was the case in few shared flats, one person cooks more food, eats and leaves the food for the

other people coming for example twenty minutes later or for those who are at the flat but do not want to eat at that time. Another aspect suggesting that the German young adults give a lot of importance to individual choice regarding to mealtimes was the diffusion of occasions in which only one person is eating and the other one is accompanying her/him without consuming food at the same time, because she/he has already eaten or is not hungry yet.

The diversity of tastes and diets is more tolerated among German people, who leave more freedom to personal food choice and different diets. Most of the people encountered in Berlin have in their social network vegetarian or allergic people. As a result, when they cook or go eating with people, they pay particular attention to the possibility that some people may not eat some kinds of food. This aspect appeared as well in the survey directed by Fischler, where the researchers revealed that the German population prefers to have more choice and for several reasons they tolerate a guest who calls the host before coming to a home dinner to specify what he/she does not eat (Fischler et al., 2008).

This data suggests the existence of different attitudes towards food in France and Germany, such as the role of the individual choice and the social norms of eating together. For several historical, ideological and contextual reasons, mealtime seem to be a central social institution in France. The established and consolidated systems of norms strongly regulate mealtimes, meal content and meal structure. This system as other studies confirmed is homogenous in France and has not evolved so much during last decades (De Saint Pol, 2005; Herpin, 1988; Pfirsch, 1997). In Germany, historical and ideological conditions have encouraged individuality and communitarianism (Elias, 1976; Pfirsch, 1997; Weber, 1967). This does not mean that meals are not sociable occasions for German young adults. An example of this is the fact that Germans really often underlined the pleasure of taking the time to eat. Nonetheless, they do not define their solo eating occasions as quicker, as the French population underlined. This point seems to highlight that for Germans the festive or extra-ordinary meals are the occasions when they have the possibility to take their time to eat. On the contrary, for the French population, the fact of eating alone and consequently quicker is exceptional, because it is not what they are used to. Furthermore, eating and food are central topics of discussion in the French population and mostly when there are gatherings of people, they are around eating events. However, meals do not seem to be the privileged occasions between German young adults, who mostly find a pretext to

gather people together for a meal, such as cooking, watching a film or playing table games. There are many other activities that are undertaken between German young adults in order to gather people together and these activities are not always preceded or did not always include a shared meal.

Attitudes towards food seem to influence feelings of eating alone and eating with others. The topic of this article reveals as well a diversity of cultural patterns surrounding food. One example of this is the different ways of organization in the preparation of the meal between French and German young adults. For the French population, it is mostly about cooking for others and for the German one, it is often cooking together.

5. Conclusions

This article investigated social representations and practices of eating alone and eating together in young adults with the aim of exploring pleasures and stress aroused by the presence and the absence of people during meals. More specifically, the paper underlined the similarities observed in a specific age group within a historical context and the differences identified in the two countries, which can be explained by the socialization of the young adults in a specific socio-political context with its values, norms and structures.

Furthermore, even if the more diffused representations lead people to perceive eating alone as a negative experience and eating together as a sociable occasion, the paper highlighted that it is possible to consider the reverse of the phenomena. Eating as an individual activity could also be a source of pleasure, because it exempts people from several social constraints. Eating as a social activity does not only stimulate positive feelings, creating in this way the conditions to weave sociability. It could also be source of conflicts as any social interaction governed by hierarchies, norms, etc.

As underlined in the introduction, social scientists insist on the idea that meals are social occasions (Douglas and Nicod, 1974) and that for some individuals, eating alone is not even really eating (Sobal, 2000). A "proper" meal is essentially a social affair (Murcott, 1982; Rotenberg, 1981). Recent studies noticed that eating is mostly preferred when it is done with others. However, on one hand, more and more people have to eat alone, because of their working schedule or their living arrangement. In these cases, they do not have the choice of sharing meals. On the other hand, young adults encountered in this research appreciate as well some aspects of solo eating. These are related to the negative aspects of sociality: the obligation of discussion, the negotiation between the wishes of each individual, social norms, etc.

Additionally, the conception of eating and cooking as a social affair or as an individual matter is related to cultural patterns, as other studies underlined. For example comparing the meanings of eating well in France and Sweden, Bildtgård noticed that in France a good meal is a social event. The longer it lasted, the better it is. The pleasure of eating in France is linked with conviviality. The meal in France is also described as the opportunity to get together with colleagues, friends, etc. In the Swedish population, the social aspect of eating is less important and more connected with feast, such as for the German population we met in this research (Bildtgård, 2010). Feelings created by eating alone or eating together provoke differences not only in the reasons inducing the liking or disliking of social eating occasions, but also in the social arrangement of eating events (e.g. eating during mealtime, food choice, etc.) and the social organisation of meals (e.g. cooking for others, cooking together, etc.). For example, the norm of commensality in France ensures a certain regularity in meal times. In addition, this study highlighted how for the French population food is a gift and by offering a cooked meal is the expression of themselves. On the contrary, in the German population social ties are more commonly constructed by cooking together. This creates between them the feeling of belonging to a community. So, the mealtimes are for both sociable events. However, sociability for ones seem to be more the shared activity and the time spent in the kitchen and for the others, it is the time spent at the table and the communication during meal, which are valorised in their discourses.

Negative and positive feelings of eating alone and of eating together influence the appreciation of meals and the contrary: a well-prepared and tasty meal contributes to the social occasion (Bildtgård, 2010: 223). The catering industry has to adapt its offer to customers' needs. For example, it creates restaurants facilitating the experience for solitary customers by promoting communal tables (Jonsonn and Pipping Ekström, 2009) or it sells individual portions for people living alone, etc. Restaurants also offer a food choice to the customers allowing people to eat what they prefer thanks to the *menu à la carte* or they offer convivial experiences thanks to communal plates, which allow individuals to share the food from the same plate (Warde and Martens, 2000). While the restaurants ensure people the possibility of what they can eat independently of what their companions eat, young adults said that eating with friends at someone's home is more convivial. Eating at home is more intimate, less impersonal

and less social rules have to be followed. This study consented to observe forms of commensality among young adults, which represent an answer to the lifestyle of this age group, but they might be also the reflection of contemporary eating practices. The characteristics of the way in which people gather together in order to share meals allows them to have food choice, freedom in eating rhythms and the participation of guests in the preparation. The meals observed in young adults' eating events are a sort of buffet, where guests come with some food, help in the cooking process or contribute with money. In these situations, some of the stress felt by the host (e.g. failing the dish, cooking alone for others, etc.) and by the guests (e.g. do not enjoy the food proposed, formality, etc.) could be overcome. So, it is possible to affirm that the desire of freedom in food choice and in rhythms encouraging the individualisation of eating patterns does not necessarily lead to the declining of shared meals. Food sharing keeps its role of federating people, building extra-familial sociability and socializing individuals into a meal structure, but also in values and norms of society. The needs of the societies evolve over time. Therefore, forms of commensality evolve as well accordingly to individuals and societies' needs and social conditions.

This paper is a first reflection on this specific aspect of eating, its cultural embodiment and the impacts that it could have on the evolution of forms of commensality. In scientific literature, it is possible to read a lot about neophobia, but what about the presence or absence of people during food events? What about being familiar with companions? Sharing meals could be helpful to taste new ingredients and new dishes and might help to experience new situations and contexts. Understanding feelings of customers during solo or social eating events is an important aspect to consider for improving the hospitality sector, as the study of Jonsonn and Pipping Ekström has shown. Their study only paid the attention to specific socio-demographic profiles. Other studies should be done in order to analyse the phenomenon across cultures, social class and age groups. In addition, it might be important to study these phenomena with a chronological perspective with the aim of identifying their evolution through time. Moreover, recent researches have observed that eating with others or alone has impacts on food consumption. These studies underlined the effect on the quantity of food intake. It could be interesting to investigate further the relationship between the social dimension of eating and the quality of food consumed.

6. Acknowledgements

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