

Interpersonal consequences of joint food consumption for connection and conflict

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Abstract

For centuries, the preparation and eating of a meal has brought people together, making food consumption an inherently social process. Yet the way in which people connect over food is changing. Rising health concerns, due in part to the increase in food allergies and obesity, have shifted attention away from the social aspects of food to food's nutritional aspects. Recognizing the social context in which food consumption takes place, this article reviews research highlighting the interpersonal consequences of joint food consumption. We first examine research on how sharing food connects people together, both via the type of food consumed (e.g., incidental food similarity) and the manner in which people serve and eat food (e.g., from shared vs. separate plates). We then turn to research that addresses the opposite side of the coin, discussing how the inability to share in a meal can be isolating, as well as how people navigate conflicting preferences when making food decisions with others. We conclude with a discussion of promising future directions for research on joint food consumption.

KEYWORDS

commensality, food consumption, food preference, interpersonal closeness, food preference, negotiation, social eating, trust

1 | INTRODUCTION

The purchase, preparation, and consumption of food is inherently social. Commensality, the act of eating together, facilitates social bonding (Fischler, 1988, 2011; Murcott, 1986; Rozin et al., 1986). People come together with others over a meal when they have something to celebrate, need cheering up, or are introducing new acquaintances to

long-time friends. Indeed, eating serves a central role in developing and maintaining relationships and is often ritualized (Kniazeva & Venkatesh, 2007; Ratcliffe et al., 2019; Vohs et al., 2013).

Historically, eating has been ingrained into social and cultural life (Rozin, 2005), with different groups and cultures defining themselves through their shared tastes, cooking traditions, and food restrictions. The rules and restrictions that groups impose on their members function in part as a means to strengthen group identity, drawing in group members while simultaneously excluding others from the meal and the social bond (Goode et al., 1984; Kittler et al., 2012; Mintz & Du Bois, 2002). Take Passover for example, The imposition of food restrictions during this time lead those who observe the holiday to draw closer to others who share the restriction and pull away from others who are unrestricted (Woolley et al., 2020). As such, food consumption can increase cohesion and interdependence among group members.

Yet how people connect over food is changing. The rise in obesity and related health concerns has shifted people's focus from the social aspects of food to its nutritional functionality. Simultaneously, rising concerns over food restrictions and food allergies have made navigating joint food consumption a challenge. On top of this, people are increasingly living and working remotely, making it difficult to come together over a meal in the first place. These challenges in coordinating joint food consumption have coincided with a rise in loneliness, suggesting that food may play an important role in satisfying social-relationship goals (Ratner & Hamilton, 2015; Rozin, 2005).

Recognizing the social context in which food consumption takes place (Lieberman et al., 2016; Woolley & Fishbach, 2017, 2019), we review research on how food consumption influences group processes and how people navigate their social relationships when making decisions over food. In Section 2, we discuss how the type of food people eat with others influences closeness and trust between individuals. In Section 3, we turn our discussion to the style of eating, examining benefits of eating from shared plates (i.e., family-style) versus separate plates for cooperation. In Section 4, we discuss the opposite side of the coin, how the inability to share in a meal can be isolating, as well as how people navigate conflicting preferences when making food decisions with others. Table A1 in the appendix summarizes the findings reviewed in Sections 2–4. Then, in Section 5, we highlight promising future directions, including the role of technology in changing how people connect over food and potential boundary conditions under which commensality might harm the social bond.

2 | HOW THE TYPE OF FOOD CONSUMED AFFECTS SOCIAL CONNECTION

Eating is a central part of people's identity and is imbued with cultural and social meaning (Rozin et al., 1999). For this reason, the type of food people consume can influence social connection. In this section, we review research on how people signal a shared group membership and connect with others through (1) similar food preferences, (2) eating incidentally similar food, and (3) eating certain types of food.

2.1 | Connection from similar food preferences

Similar food consumption is associated with connection. For one, people infer greater connection among those who share food (Miller, Rozin, & Fiske, 1998), and friends closer in a social network actually eat more similarly (Crandall, 1988, de la Haye et al., 2010; Fletcher et al., 2011). The association between similar food consumption and social connection emerges in early childhood. Infants and toddlers prefer people (and puppets) who share their food preferences (Fawcett & Markson, 2010; Gerson et al., 2017; Mahajan & Wynn, 2012). Infants also make inferences about others' social connection from their food preferences. For example, 9-month-olds anticipate that people with shared food preferences will like each other more than people with opposing food preferences (Lieberman et al., 2014). Infants also expect people from similar (vs. different) groups to share food preferences (Lieberman et al., 2016). This

research thus demonstrates that from an early age, people draw on shared food preferences as the basis for social categorization.

Beyond drawing inferences about others based on their food consumption, people strategically match their food choice to others' choices to signal group membership and to affiliate. As one illustration, Asian-Americans in a lab-based study whose American identity was (vs. was not) threatened adopted unhealthy eating behaviors to reassert their American identity (Guendelman et al., 2011; Study 2). These threatened participants were more likely to select and eat American dishes (e.g., hamburgers, hot dogs, pizza), which were more caloric, and less likely to select and eat Asian dishes (e.g., bibimbap, pho, chicken teriyaki). As a result, these participants ordered dishes with 182 more calories on average. Likewise, in a lab-based study by another research team (Mead et al., 2011; Study 3), people assigned to experience social isolation (vs. not) were willing to pay more for a food item that they disliked, but that a potential interaction partner presumably liked (i.e., chicken feet). Importantly, excluded participants' willingness to pay was only higher if they believed that their willingness to pay was public and that they would be sharing this food with their partner; this effect did not occur if their willingness to pay was private or they did not expect to interact with their partner, thus indicating that social exclusion caused people to spend in the service of affiliation rather than causing people to conform to another's preference.

The strategy of matching one's food choice to another's can be effective, as interpersonal similarity in attitudes, personality characteristics, or background can create a sense of belonging (Heider, 1958; Miller, Downs, & Prentice, 1998; Tesser, 1988) and group identity (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Indeed, even a minimal degree of similarity between people, such as sharing a birthday, can lead people to perceive themselves and another person as a social unit (Miller, Downs, & Prentice, 1998). For this reason, people like others who share their food preferences.

2.2 | Connection from incidental similar food consumption

It makes sense that enjoying similar foods enhances bonding. If two people like sushi, they have more opportunities to spend time together eating a meal that they both enjoy. A potentially more interesting question is whether incidental similarity, which does not signal preference, affects social connection. To test this question, Woolley and Fishbach (2017) assigned pairs to eat the same or different candy before completing a trust game. They found that eating similar food increased trust—these pairs felt closer and thus invested more money in their partner (i.e., trusted their partner more). In another study, Woolley and Fishbach (2017) examined whether similar food consumption improves negotiations. Pairs were assigned to eat either the same or different snacks and then completed a wage negotiation. If a resolution was not reached after two rounds of negotiating, the conflict escalated into a costly strike that both sides wanted to avoid. Pairs consuming similar foods incurred fewer strike days, which was mediated by increased closeness.

Is there something special about incidental, similar *food* consumption compared with other forms of incidental similarity? Given that from an early age, humans use food consumption to form social categories (Lieberman et al., 2017), similarity in food consumption may promote stronger social connection and trust relative to other forms of similarity. As suggestive evidence of this, Woolley and Fishbach (2017) found that observers perceived pairs eating similar food as trusting one another more than pairs eating dissimilar food, a result that did not emerge when observers evaluated pairs wearing similar (vs. dissimilar) shirt colors. Incidental similarity in food consumption may thus send a stronger signal of trust—something that others pick up on and infer.

2.3 | Connection from unhealthy food consumption and unique dining experiences

Beyond general similarity, certain types of shared food consumption are especially connecting. For instance, when eating unhealthy food, people liked those who ate a larger (vs. smaller) portion than them because they felt less judged for their own unhealthy consumption (Leone et al., 2008).

More broadly, shared unhealthy food consumption often connects: Pairs who consumed an indulgent milkshake (620 calories) felt closer than pairs who consumed a sensible milkshake (140 calories; Cummings & Tomiyama, 2019; Study 2). The authors propose that this effect occurs because engaging in risky eating increases positive affect, such as excitement, to bond pairs together. Indeed, other research finds that co-indulging bonds people by giving them a feeling of mischievously partnering in their “crime” (Lowe & Haws, 2014). Yet the opposite occurs when people’s health is on the line. In one study, participants who learned that they were at risk for developing a health problem expected to like a friend more when the two co-abstained from an unhealthy appetizer than when they co-indulged. The reason? When the consequences of self-control failure are severe, people bond through supporting each other through abstention (Lowe & Haws, 2014; Study 1b).

Sharing an extraordinary food experience, one that is unusual or infrequent, can also enhance closeness. Strangers who engaged in an extraordinary food experience—they smelled a Neapolitan-flavored wafer to see how sweet the wafer was—felt closer than strangers who engaged in a mundane food experience—they let the wafer melt in their mouth to see how sweet it was (Min et al., 2018; Study 1c). The authors found that sharing an extraordinary food experience increased connection by distracting people from the discomfort or awkwardness that can come from meeting someone new. As such, closeness increased when strangers, but not friends, shared an extraordinary experience (Min et al., 2018).

3 | HOW THE STYLE OF EATING AFFECTS SOCIAL CONNECTION

Beyond the *type* of food consumed with others, the *manner* of serving and consuming food also plays an important role in social connection. For example, Chinese or Indian meals are served on shared dishes (family-style), which requires diners to serve themselves a portion of food and coordinate consumption with others at the table. In contrast, at a French restaurant, people are served on individual plates, which require less coordination with other diners. The different levels of coordination that these meals require in turn influence cooperation. In this section, we review research on how the manner of serving and consuming food affects people’s coordination and cooperation outside of the meal.

3.1 | Correlational evidence for the benefits of communal eating

Family-style meals, in contrast to individual meals, require people to attend to the needs of others (De Backer et al., 2015). When food is shared communally, diners need to think about the division of food and others’ needs to ensure that everyone receives their fair share, an issue that is less salient when food is served on individual plates.

Correlational studies suggest that the style of serving food affects people’s actions toward others. Within families, the frequency of family meal consumption is associated with family connection and adolescents’ ability to talk with their parents (Utter et al., 2013; see also Fiese et al., 2002). Outside of the family, altruistic behavior in adulthood is positively correlated with the frequency of eating home-cooked meals, a proxy for shared meals, during childhood (De Backer et al., 2015). Qualitative research further points to the benefits of jointly preparing and consuming a meal (Kniffin et al., 2015). In this research, firefighters in a unit that engaged in the daily act of preparing and eating a group meal displayed better team-level performance and cooperative behavior. The authors point to several plausible mechanisms, including the possibility that eating together may increase conversation among co-workers and that

food sharing may influence bonding given the greater intimacy of the activity. Overall, these findings highlight that preparing and eating a meal with others, beyond what type of food is eaten, matters for prosociality and for improved organizational outcomes.

3.2 | Causal evidence that eating from shared (vs. Separate) plates promotes cooperation

Can eating food from a shared (vs. individual) plate cause people to be more cooperative? To empirically examine this question, Woolley and Fishbach (2019) asked pairs of strangers to eat a snack from individual bowls or from shared bowls before participating in a wage negotiation exercise. Pairs eating from a shared bowl resolved the wage conflict faster than pairs eating from separate bowls. A similar pattern was found in a follow-up study that used a different measure of cooperation—an iterated prisoner's dilemma framed as an airfare-pricing game. Participants ate goldfish crackers from either a communal container or their own individual container. While eating, they needed to set weekly route prices for their airline over the course of 20 weeks (i.e., 20 rounds of the game). In each round, individuals faced two choice options—a competitive or a cooperative choice—and each person's outcome depended on both individuals' choices. If both made the cooperative choice, both earned \$5 MM that round. However, if one cooperated and the other defected, the defector earned \$7 MM and the cooperator earned \$2 MM. If both defected, both earned \$3 MM. Here too, sharing a single source of food increased the likelihood of pairs cooperating compared with eating from separate sources (Woolley & Fishbach, 2019).

Why does this effect occur? To explore this, Woolley and Fishbach (2019) measured pairs' perceived coordination while eating and negotiating and videotaped pairs as they ate from shared (vs. separate) containers. Pairs sharing a food source reported greater coordination, which led to improved negotiation outcomes, regardless of whether pairs were friends or strangers. Video analyses confirmed that behaviorally, pairs eating from a shared container were more synchronized in their consumption relative to pairs eating from separate containers.

These findings were conceptually replicated and extended by a separate team of researchers (Cao et al., 2020). Cao and colleagues conducted two face-to-face negotiation experiments in which negotiators verbally and nonverbally communicated during an eight-issue job-offer negotiation exercise. Pairs who took crackers from a shared (vs. separate) plate had improved outcomes in this multi-issue negotiation. This finding demonstrates that the positive effect of food sharing on cooperation and business outcomes is robust across different tasks and study populations.

4 | HOW PEOPLE NAVIGATE INTERPERSONAL CONFLICT FROM JOINT FOOD CONSUMPTION

Whereas food consumption can facilitate bonding, it can also have the opposite effect, pulling people apart. People are at times discriminated against based on the food that they can and cannot eat. As a result, people sometimes withhold their food preferences, making it challenging to navigate joint food consumption decisions. This section reviews research on how eating with others can paradoxically contribute to increased loneliness, and how the desire to coordinate food consumption with others can at times lead people to choose less preferred foods.

4.1 | Food restrictions increase loneliness

Globally, there has been a sharp rise in food restrictions (Sicherer & Sampson, 2018; Tang & Mullins, 2017). Managing food restrictions (e.g., a food allergy or restriction due to health, religion, culture, or other reason) is critical from a health perspective (Sicherer & Sampson, 2018), but beyond health, food restrictions can also interfere with people's social lives.

Qualitative evidence from parents suggests that food restrictions make it challenging for their children to bond with others (Fenton et al., 2013; Nettleton et al., 2010; Pitchforth et al., 2011) and can result in the restricted child experiencing adverse outcomes, such as bullying (Lieberman et al., 2010; Shemesh et al., 2013). Manifesting these challenges, those living with celiac disease, one reason for food restriction, described it as “a lonely struggle” (Sverker et al., 2005).

Beyond qualitative descriptions, empirical research has found that food restrictions are associated with loneliness: Adults with food restrictions reported greater social isolation compared to their unrestricted counterparts, teachers of students with food restrictions believed these students to be lonelier than their unrestricted peers, and in a nationally representative survey conducted by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), parents reported that their children with food restrictions had a greater difficulty getting along with others and were more depressive and tearful (Woolley et al., 2020). Woolley et al. (2020) also documented a causal effect of food restriction on increased loneliness. Participants who were assigned to experience a food restriction (they believed they were unable to drink what others were drinking because of their age) felt lonelier than those who were not experiencing a food restriction (they believed everyone drank the same beverage).

Why are food restrictions isolating? For one, those with a food restriction are unable to coordinate their consumption with other diners. If eating family-style meals affects cooperation via coordination, as highlighted in Section 3, then the inability to share food with others due to a food restriction may harm the social bond by inhibiting this coordination. Food restrictions further burden the social interaction, as people with a food restriction worry that others will judge them (Woolley et al., 2020). These “food worries” lead people with a food restriction to feel lonely when eating with unrestricted others. In one study illustrating this, university students keeping Kosher for Passover (i.e., abstaining from leavened food) felt lonelier on average, as they dined with students who did not observe the food restriction (Woolley et al., 2020). However, it is not all bad news—this research found that food restricted individuals reported less loneliness when they were asked to recall a time that they were able to eat the same food that others were eating compared with when they recalled their typical dining experience.

4.2 | Withholding food preferences to connect

People with food restrictions face an especially hard time when coordinating their food consumption with others and fear that others will reject them as picky eaters due to their restriction (Woolley et al., 2020). Yet even unrestricted individuals can hold concerns about whether others will judge them based on their food preferences (e.g., Liu & Min, 2020).

To avoid potential judgment and appear more easygoing, people at times prefer *not* to express a preference over food when dining with others. When asked which restaurant they prefer, responders believe it is better to say that they are fine with either option than to express which restaurant they truly like, yet requesters prefer that responders express a preference (Liu & Min, 2020). Indeed, in a joint consumption context, failing to express a preference, such as where to go for dinner or what snack to eat, can harm the social interaction as requesters feel less close to responders who do not express a preference (Liu & Min, 2020). Requesters also find it more challenging to make a joint food decision when they do not know what the other person prefers. When choosing a snack to share with a partner, decision-makers liked their partner less and found the decision more difficult when their partner expressed no preference than when they expressed a preference, as decision-makers assumed people who expressed no preference were hiding their true desires (Kim et al., 2023; Study 4).

Moreover, failing to express one's food preference can lead to dehumanization, causing others to see the person as more robotic, which further harms interpersonal relationships (Lopez et al., 2021; Study 6). Preferences define who we are and help us differentiate ourselves from others (Brewer, 1991; Maslach, 1974; Vignoles et al., 2000). Yet it is a delicate balance; while people strive for uniqueness, they also want to assimilate with others (Chan et al., 2012; Lopez

et al., 2021). Thus, people at times shy away from expressing their food preference, despite the fact that withholding a preference can have negative consequences for interpersonal relationships.

4.3 | Sacrificing food preferences to coordinate with others

When people know others' food preferences, they take them into consideration, even if this means choosing an option they personally prefer less. In one study, people in a romantic relationship chose a beer that they liked less but that their romantic partner preferred when they expected to consume the beer together with their partner (Garcia-Rada et al., 2019; Study 1). This effect occurs because individuals consuming with their partner focused on their partner's enjoyment, prioritizing their partner's preference over their own desires.

Outside of romantic relationships, people also modify their food choices to match their dining partner's. People are especially sensitive to this when dining with a stigmatized other. As one illustration, when participants chose whether to order fries or a salad as a side dish for themselves and an overweight person, they were more likely to choose matching dishes (e.g., both have fries or both have salad) relative to when choosing a side dish for themselves and a normal weight person (Liu et al., 2013; Study 2). Whereas participants expected the normal weight person's feelings to be unaffected by their food choice, participants were concerned that the overweight person would feel more negatively about themselves if non-matching side dishes were selected (e.g., one person had fries, and another person had a salad).

Individual differences and group size can also play a role in how people navigate joint food decisions. Wu et al. (2019; Study 1) found that when choosing wine for the table, people who were more *interdependent* took other diners' preferences into consideration, regardless of group size. People who were more *independent*, however, let their own preferences guide the wine selection when choosing for a larger group, only incorporating others' preferences into the decision when choosing for a smaller group. These results suggest that group size and individual differences can influence people's willingness to sacrifice their preference for the good of the group.

Overall, this research highlights that decisions over food are not just about what one enjoys eating—people also care about what their choices say about themselves and how their dining partners will react to their food choices.

5 | OPPORTUNITIES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH ON JOINT FOOD CONSUMPTION

As reviewed in the prior sections, research on joint food consumption has focused primarily on the positive consequences of dining with others on interpersonal relationships (for a summary of Sections 2–4, see Table A1 in the appendix). Yet people are frequently eating meals alone (Fleming, 2019; Johnson, 2013). There are many reasons for this, including increasingly busy and hectic schedules, as well as the rise of geographically dispersed families (Urry, 2012). Further, people may not see the benefit of eating together with others, and there may be instances when eating with others may actually harm the social bond, such that people do not prioritize commensality. Taking the changing food landscape into account, in this section, we propose additional avenues for future research, including how people can use technology to connect over food when not co-located, and potential moderators influencing the relationship between food consumption and social connection.

5.1 | What are the benefits of digital commensality?

Changes in technology have supported new forms of social eating. Qualitative interviews of families who are geographically dispersed find that such families rely on technology to stay in touch and continue to use food to bond (Epp et al., 2014). In one example, sisters who often shared a favorite snack at home were unable to continue

this ritualistic practice when one sister went to college. Although no longer co-located, the sisters texted each other whenever one ate the favorite snack on her own, helping them to connect while apart (Epp et al., 2014). Similarly, couples in long-distance relationships or colleagues working remotely join together over virtual happy hour or dinner on Zoom. When people were unable to gather in-person during the Covid-19 pandemic, they held virtual dinner parties with friends and family (Heil, 2020) and companies organized virtual lunch breaks to connect remote colleagues (Cassidy, 2021). Advancements in technology that allow people to connect over food open additional research questions related to digital commensality; we discuss two here.

First, does digital commensality foster connectedness, and if so, how? Possibly, food could continue to function as a social lubricant even among remote diners, for example, by shifting people's focus from the awkwardness of virtual communication to the food that they are eating. Digital commensality is novel for most people, and thus may be construed as an extraordinary experience (Min et al., 2018), which could be especially connecting for new co-workers in offices in different cities.

Alternatively, shared food consumption among those not co-located may create a sense of togetherness by fostering synchronicity. Supporting this proposition, people expect that experiencing an event at the same time as another person will increase closeness (Shaddy et al., 2021) and people leverage synchronized scheduling to connect with people geographically dispersed (Shaddy et al., 2022). Thus, another avenue by which digital commensality could foster connectedness is via increased synchronicity.

A second question for future research is how digital commensality can be harnessed to improve team performance. With many companies maintaining a remote workforce (Parker et al., 2022), managers seek ways to help their teams collaborate and meet performance objectives. As noted previously, the joint preparation and consumption of a meal in-person promotes cooperation and improves team-level performance among co-workers (Kniffin et al., 2015). Possibly, co-workers who both eat the same food prepared from a similar source during a virtual team meeting (e.g., both have burritos from Chipotle) will also experience improvements in team outcomes compared with co-workers who bring their own lunches or order from different restaurants. Although they are not eating family-style, they are eating food prepared from the same source (e.g., Chipotle), which could improve team performance by fostering a sense of coordination between co-workers.

5.2 | Are social interactions involving food always positive?

As highlighted in Table A1, much of the research on joint food consumption has focused on positive consequences for the social bond, with some recent research examining potential negative outcomes (e.g., Garcia-Rada et al., 2019; Liu & Min, 2020; Woolley et al., 2020). Additional research is needed to further explore potential boundaries of the positive effect of commensality on social connection.

In particular, the benefits of eating similar food or eating from shared plates may come at the cost of eating food that one enjoys. There thus may be moderating factors, such as food preference, taste, and/or availability that result in benefits of *dissimilar* food consumption, which future research can examine. For example, people may feel more connected to a dining partner if both individuals order their favorite dessert, even if these desserts happen to be different, than if they both order the same dessert that neither person prefers. That is, diners may bond over both having their favorite food, rather than both having the same food.

Joint food consumption may also have negative implications for certain diners, such as those high in impression management. Similar to those with food restrictions, those high in impression management may be concerned about whether other diners are judging them based on what they eat and how much they eat. They may also be more uncomfortable extending an invitation to another person to join them for a meal for fear of being rejected. Accordingly, future research can explore whether individual differences among diners moderate the positive consequences of commensality on the social bond.

Lastly, technology may at times hinder one's ability to bond over food. For example, people frequently photograph and share their food experiences on social media, with food-related photos constituting more than 250 million posts on Instagram each month (Taher, 2019). Prior research suggests that taking photos of food can increase enjoyment of the dining experience by increasing engagement with the meal (Diehl et al., 2016). However, the consequences of this integration of food and technology on commensality is not well understood. Photo-taking narrows people's focus to the photographed object (Barasch et al., 2017), which may reduce attention paid to one's dining companions. Thus, the benefits of commensality may be reduced when technology is present, at least for in-person meals.

6 | CONCLUSION

Food consumption is an inherent part of being human, and at its core, is a way for people to connect and bond with others. What and how we eat largely influences our interpersonal relationships. Social eating has been a part of human history from the beginning. With the rise of technological innovations influencing how people come together over a meal and underexplored boundaries of the positive effect of commensality, the study of food consumption is one ripe for continued investigation and new research questions.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analyzed in this study.

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APPENDIX

TABLE A 1 Summary of the interpersonal consequences of joint food consumption.

Section	Authors	Independent variable	Dependent variable	Relationship between food and social cohesion	Key finding
2. How the type of food consumed affects social connection					
2.1 Connection from similar food preferences	Miller, Rozin, and Fiske (1998)	Food sharing	Inferred intimacy	+	People infer that others who share food are bonded
	Crandall (1988); de la Haye et al. (2010); Fletcher et al. (2011)	Distance in social network	Similarity in eating	N/A	Friends closer in a social network eat more similarly
	Liberman et al. (2014)	Shared (vs. opposing) food preference	Inferred social relationship	+	9-month-olds infer greater liking among people sharing food preferences
	Liberman et al. (2016)	Same (vs. different) social group	Expected similarity in food preference	N/A	Infants expect people from similar groups to share food preferences
	Guendelman et al. (2011; Study 2)	Identity threat (present vs. absent)	Food preference	N/A	Asian-Americans whose American identity was (vs. was not) threatened adopted unhealthy eating behaviors to reassert their American identity
	Mead et al. (2011; Study 3)	Excluded (vs. not) × affiliation opportunity (present, willingness to pay public; present, willingness to pay private; absent, willingness to pay public)	Willingness to pay for food they disliked, but that a potential partner liked	N/A	People assigned to experience social exclusion (vs. not) were willing to pay more for a food item that they disliked, but that a potential interaction partner liked, when they expected that their willingness to pay was public and that they would be sharing the food with their partner
2.2 Connection from incidental similar food consumption	Woolley and Fishbach (2017)	Similar (vs. dissimilar) incidental food consumption	Interpersonal closeness; trust	+	Pairs eating similar (vs. dissimilar) food felt closer and trusted each other more

(Continues)

TABLE A 1 (Continued)

Section	Authors	Independent variable	Dependent variable	Relationship between food and social cohesion	Key finding
2.3 Connection from unhealthy food consumption and unique dining experiences	Leone et al. (2008)	Portion of unhealthy food a person consumes	Liking	+	People liked others who ate a larger (vs. smaller) portion of unhealthy food than they did
	Cummings and Tomiyama (2019)	Co-consuming indulgent or sensible food	Interpersonal closeness	+	People felt closer to an interaction partner when the two both consumed indulgent (vs. sensible) food
	Lowe and Haws (2014; Study 1b)	Co-indulging versus co-abstaining × high versus low health risk	Expected liking	+	Co-indulging (vs. co-abstaining) increased expected liking of a friend when health risks were low, which reversed when health risks were high
	Min et al. (2018; Study 1c)	Extraordinariness of food experience	Interpersonal closeness	+	Pairs of strangers felt closer when engaging in an extraordinary (vs. ordinary) food experience
3. How the style of eating affects social connection					
3.1 Correlational evidence for the benefits of communal eating	De Backer et al. (2015)	Eating home-cooked meals in childhood	Altruistic behavior in adulthood	+	Positive correlation between childhood frequency of eating home-cooked meals (a proxy for shared meals) and altruistic behavior in adulthood
	Utter et al. (2013)	Family meal frequency	Family connection	+	Positive correlation between family meal frequency and family connection
	Kniffin et al. (2015)	Joint preparation and consumption of a meal	Team performance	+	Firefighters preparing and eating a meal together cooperated more and performed better as a team
3.2 Causal evidence that eating from shared (vs. separate) plates promotes cooperation	Woolley and Fishbach (2019)	Eating from shared (vs. separate) plates	Coordination; negotiation outcomes	+	Pairs eating from shared (vs. separate) plates felt more coordinated, which led to improved negotiation outcomes for strangers and friends
	Cao et al. (2020)	Eating from shared (vs. separate) plates	Negotiation outcomes	+	Pairs eating from shared (vs. separate) plates had improved outcomes in a multi-issue negotiation

TABLE A1 (Continued)

Section	Authors	Independent variable	Dependent variable	Relationship between food and social cohesion	Key finding
4. How people navigate interpersonal conflict from joint food consumption					
4.1 Food restrictions increase loneliness	Lieberman et al. (2010); Pitchforth et al. (2011); Shemesh et al. (2013)	Food restriction	Adverse interpersonal outcomes in childhood	-	Qualitative interviews find an association between food restrictions and social vulnerability in childhood
	Woolley et al. (2020)	Food restriction	Loneliness	-	People assigned to experience a food restriction (vs. not) felt lonelier
4.2 Withholding food preferences to connect	Liu and Min (2020)	Role in initiating joint food consumption (requester vs. responder)	Desire for food preference expression; interpersonal closeness	-	Requestors soliciting others' consumption preferences (e.g., "Where do you want to go for dinner?") desire preference expression and expect to feel closer to individuals who express a preference, but responders prefer not to express a preference
	Kim et al. (2023; Study 4)	When choosing food to share, partner has explicit (vs. no) food preference	Liking; difficulty of food decision	-	Decision-makers liked their partner less and found the food decision more difficult when their partner expressed no preference (vs. an explicit preference)
	Lopez et al. (2021; Study 6)	Person reveals an explicit (vs. no) food preference	Dehumanization; re-hiring decision	N/A	People dehumanized and were less interested in re-hiring someone for a work task who communicated no preference (vs. an explicit preference)

(Continues)

TABLE A 1 (Continued)

Section	Authors	Independent variable	Dependent variable	Relationship between food and social cohesion	Key finding
4.3 Sacrificing food preferences to coordinate with others	Garcia-Rada et al. (2019); Study 1)	Consuming beer with (vs. without) one's romantic partner	Choice of beer one (vs. one's partner) prefers	-	People chose a beer that they liked less but that their romantic partner preferred when they expected to drink with their partner
	Liu et al. (2013); Study 2)	Choice of food for self and a normal weight (vs. overweight) person	Choosing matching (vs. non-matching) side dishes	N/A	People were more likely to choose matching side dishes for themselves and an overweight (vs. normal weight) person
	Wu et al. (2019); Study 1)	Interdependent versus independent self-construal × small versus large group size	Amount willing to spend on one's preferred wine	N/A	Interdependent people incorporated other diners' preference into their wine selection regardless of group size, whereas independent people only incorporated others' preference when choosing wine for a smaller group

Note: + indicates a positive consequence of joint food consumption on social cohesion; - indicates a negative consequence of joint food consumption on social cohesion; N/A indicates that the paper did not study a consequence of joint food consumption.