

Research Plan

## **TABLE MANNERS**

An Ethnographic Study of Social Eating in Hoboken, Antwerp



Family dinner (photograph supplied by author)

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## MEAL SHARING

Growing up in a family that loves a good meal, gatherings naturally centre around the dining table. Holidays take place in my grandmother's formal dining room, where familiar stories – told a hundred times before – wave through the conversation like cherished family heirlooms. Ordinary weekday dinners, on the other hand, take place around the kitchen table, where we air the grievances of the day over comforting plates of food. Leftovers make their way across the street to Mrs Van Schie who never fails to express her appreciation of the food.

These traditions have evolved gently over the generations, each adapting them to the demands of the time. As such, daily routines have changed. While holiday gatherings still overflow with food, daily family dinners are often shortened or delayed as our schedules grow busier. My grandmother, rooted in the own rhythm, continues her weekly trip to the Wednesday market, picking out groceries and exchanging greetings with familiar marketgoers. My mother, on the other hand, stops at the grocery store on the way home, piecing together our meals on the fly, adapting our rituals to modern routines.

For the past five years, following my grandfather's passing, my grandmother, my mother, and I have lived together, a multigenerational home where we've mixed some of our eating traditions and created new routines. Yet even amid these changes, the social essence of our meals remains the same: whether an extensive celebration or a simple dinner, sharing food is our way of staying connected. In our household, food continues to be much more than nourishment—it is our family's way of being together and sustaining friendships.

## AIM

Whenever I visit a new place, I find myself drawn to its vibrant centre, where restaurants and bars reign supreme. To me, these are the places where people come to not out of necessity, but by choice, making them the perfect settings for people-watching. My search for such a spot in Hoboken, however, proved unexpectedly elusive. On Monday morning, I found myself at the market in the heart of Hoboken, seated with a cappuccino on a lonely terrace, surrounded only by locals aged 60 and up. Later that evening, hoping to experience a livelier scene over dinner, I returned—only to discover the place closed up tight for the night. After wandering a bit longer, I finally settled on one of the town’s many quiet chip shops, brightly lit and nearly empty. It left me wondering: Where do people eat together?

This research aims to explore and document the social eating routines and practices in Hoboken, Antwerp, focusing mainly on the “where” – the “when” – and the “with whom”, among different groups in the community, which positions the research in an anthropological and sociological framework. Hoboken’s population is culturally diverse, and this research aims to uncover the distinct practices, preferences, and shared habits around social eating that characterize different demographic groups within the area.

Through ethnographic methods, this research will examine the specific locations—whether homes, workplaces, or informal outdoor settings that I have not found yet—where residents come together to share meals, as well as the rhythms of daily and weekly routines that define these social eating practices. This understanding of routine eating habits can reveal how food-centered gatherings naturally support community connections and may help identify potential opportunities to strengthen these practices.

## **METHODOLOGY: PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION**

Ian Cook describes participant observation as “a method which involves living and/or working within particular communities in order to understand how they work ‘from the inside’” (p. 167) (Cook, 1979)\*. To answer the question of where social eating occurs within Hoboken, it is essential to become a part residents’ eating practices.

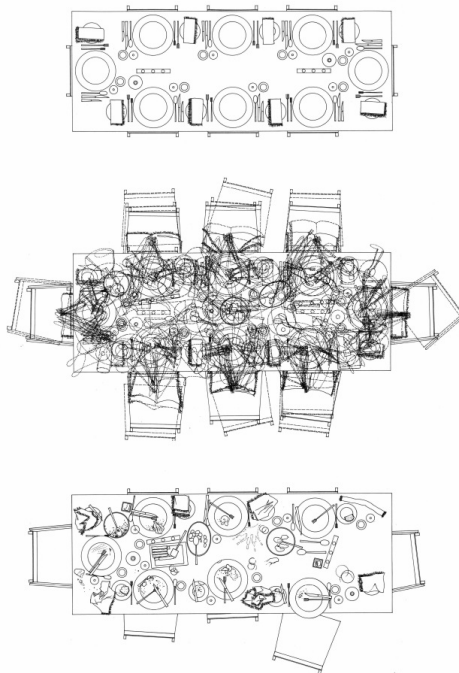
By spending time in locations where people are likely to gather – such as the Monday morning market or community centres – social connections can be made with whomever is open to sharing their social eating practices, and this can hopefully be followed through into deeper understanding. Detailed notes and photographs will document the who, where, and how of these gatherings, providing insights into daily patterns surrounding meal sharing.

While it’s impossible to predict exactly how this research will unfold, some initial precautions have been made. Engaging with Belgian-speaking groups may be more straightforward; however, non-Belgian-speaking communities are equally valuable to the study. Community centres may provide essential support here, as they have established networks that could aid in reaching a diverse range of participants. Connections have been made with two other students who both will be focusing on ethnographic methods as well, thus teaming up could lead to more interesting contacts. Connecting with the community centres will be our first step in this research.

\* Cook, I. (1979). Participant observation. In Flowerdew, R., & Martin, D. (Ed.), *Methods in Human Geography* (second edition) (pp. 167-190). Harlow, Essex: Pearson Education Limited.

## METHODOLOGY: VISUAL MAPPING

To effectively capture and visually represent the social eating routines observed, visual mapping techniques will be used. Photographs taken during the observation process will create visual records of locations and interactions, which can then be catalogued and annotated through various highlighting methods. Drawing techniques will be used to show essential elements while leaving out less relevant details. An example of this approach is Sarah Wigglesworth's "The Disorder of the Dining Table" (2002), a series of drawings depicting dining tables before, during, and after a meal. These drawings reveal the dynamics between people around the dining table.



The Disorder of the Dining Table  
(Wigglesworth, 2002)

## **METHODOLOGY: INTERVIEW**

Interviews will be a key method for gaining deeper insights into the social eating practices of the observed residents. While current social eating practices are central to this research, understanding the reasons behind these rituals is equally important. Some residents may find satisfaction in their current ways of sharing meals, while others may desire change. This approach will encourage participants to share stories and details that might not emerge in observational settings, allowing for a more comprehensive understanding of the observed experiences.

Given the personal and narrative nature of the topic, the interviews will be semi-structured, allowing interviewees the freedom to share their stories. Through open-ended questions the interviews will explore current practices across different cultural backgrounds and may provide insights into residents' wishes or aspirations for their social eating rituals.

## ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY

1. Dunbar, R. I. M. (2017). *Breaking Bread: the Functions of Social Eating*. *Adaptive Human Behavior and Physiology*, 3(3), 198-211. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40750-017-0061-4>.

This article argues that eating socially more often will lead to positive feelings such as: happiness, satisfaction, trusting and engagement. The survey data following this articles research provide interesting factors that lead to an increased sense of feeling close to your dinner companion. These factors, such as laughter, reminiscences, and the use of alcohol, are interesting to keep track of when observing social meals.

2. Parham, S. (2015). *Food and urbanism: The convivial city and a sustainable future*. Bloomsbury Academic.

This book, however not fully read yet, seems to have a distinct view on how food related practices can help improve urban spaces. Therefor, this book could be interesting for later stadia within this project, where the research will influence design choices.

3. Steel, C. (2013). *Hungry city: How food shapes our lives*. Random house.

Particularly in the chapters: market and supermarket, the kitchen and at table, Steel emphasizes the idea of food as a social connector, which jumpstarted my initial thought process from the initial question of “where to people eat?” to the interesting possible insights surrounding urbanism and architecture that could be gained from understanding the social dynamics surrounding social eating.

## ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY

4. Tiravanija, R. (1992). *Untitled (Free)* [Installation]. Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY.

This piece of conceptual art includes its visitors to be (part of) the art. By changing the gallery into a communal dining area and serving the visitors food, the art itself is the interactions that are created because of the setting. To me, this emphasizes the significant social aspect of food.

5. Wigglesworth, S. (2002). *The disorder of the dining table*. [giclee print on art paper].

The method of drawing out rituals that happen at the dining table could be interesting for this research. By choosing exactly what moments are put down on paper, the drawings both visualize and interpret observations. These drawings don't just summarize experiences, but they also make statements regarding the topic.