



Lots of food, but poor meals

**– a sociological study of the worksite
as a meal arena**



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The study

- Understanding the conditions for having meals at work
- A qualitative approach
- Fieldwork at different workplaces, with production or service around the clock
 - Industrial company producing components for medical technology
 - Hospital
 - Bus company
 - Nursing home





■ Observations

- Spending time at the workplaces, among different occupational groups and during different parts of the day.
- Knowledge about working schedules, organization, food habits, food supply at work and so on.

■ Qualitative Interviews

- With employees as well as with representatives from the management and from those working in the staff restaurant.

■ A Questionnaire

How did the *"meal actors"* reason about food and meals? How did they prioritise and value food and meals at work?

The meal

■ Food and drink

■ Time

- Time for having meals at work
- The experience of time

■ Place

- Room for the meal to take place
- The experience of the room

■ Social relations

- Is it possible to have meals together with others at work?
- How are these relations valued?





The meal is often rationalised away at the workplaces

- The meal should take no time
- The meal should take no place
- The meal should cost no money



Time...

- Time is often viewed as a quantitative tool in organizing people and work


- *But* time also has important qualitative aspects; time is lived and experienced.

- At the industrial company, the shiftworkers had 21 minutes meal break during their shift


I mean, if you have 21 minutes and during that time you must change clothes, go to the staff restaurant, put your food on a plate and re-heat it in a microwave, it takes four or five minutes. Then you're going to sit down and eat calmly, then go all the way back to the department, change clothes again, wash your hands, take on a coat and then you're back. It easily takes 30 minutes.




Having a meal or "just eating"?



"... I think it may be stressful, but they (the employees) eat, as I can see".



The difference between having a meal and just eat becomes obvious, not necessarily in relation to the kind of food on the plate, but to the time given to the food and accordingly, the attitudes and values to the food in a particular situation.



Food and drink as tools for collecting people and creating a sense of fellowship

- Examples *"pizza rituals"* during evening shifts

Place...

- The physical environment surrounding the meal is not always prioritised
- The influence of the room in the meal experience
 - Size, colours, noise, light.
 - Is it clean and are there enough seats?
- The staff restaurant as "a social spot"



Who is using the staff restaurant?

How is it planned for the meal and who should be able to buy food at work and when?

- The normative daytime still dominates

The often crowded staff dining rooms at the hospital wards in the study not only affected what was eaten, for example cold food instead of hot, but also the duration of the break and how the food was experienced.

For me I think its is a little stressful when there are so many people and everybody is talking so loudly. There is a lot of talking and I often feel that during the break I would like to have some peace and quiet, it should be a break from work [...] I am more than happy to just leave the room, it's true, I relax more when I'm with the patients, it is more calm.



"The meal should cost no money"...

- Expressed by "the meal actors"
- Due to organisational and time restrictions, the lack of space to eat and criticism about the food being served, many employees in the study were not interested in spending a lot of money on the food eaten at work.
- The family was an important actor as well, especially in understanding how women reasoned about the meal at work.
 - *"Micrologistic work"*





- Extended opening hours at staff restaurants is often considered unprofitable and expensive.
 - During evenings and nights there are normally fewer people working during the shifts, which is a common argument for not offering food during this period of the day.
 - However, there seem to be few alternatives that consider healthy meal opportunities for people with working hours around the clock.

Health implications...

What will be the consequences when workplaces only offer people the possibility to *eat*, and where *the meal* and its important 'ingredients' are rationalised away, or when it is only possible for a few to actually have meals at work that not only tastes good but are also allowed to take time and be enjoyed in a comfortable atmosphere together with other people?

The meal is something we eat, experience, prioritise and value, create in a social context and give time and space.



Thank you for your attention!

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