
The Unwritten Behavior Rules of Having a Meal in a Dining Hall

Furniture is Overrated:

Reactions to Eating on the Floor in the Dining Hall

Everyone acts differently at home than they would in public. When I'm in the comfort of my own home, I eat on the floor all the time. To clarify, I don't eat food off the floor, I just like to sit, cross-legged, typically with a fuzzy blanket and in front of the television with my plate of food on my lap, a pillow, or on a chair in front of me. I've done this since I was little and it's just more comfortable for me, however, I've been socialized to know that people aren't supposed to eat on the floor in public places. But, if I walk into Upper Debot here at UW-Stevens Point, there is no sign anywhere that says you must sit at a table to eat your food. This is a social norm not reinforced by any laws or rules (in most cases), but by socialization. I chose this for my breaching experiment since I live on campus and can access the dining halls and be able to easily observe a lot of people's reactions in one short time period.

Before completing my experiment, I wanted to create some sort of plan and make predictions about how people may react. I went to the dining hall with my girlfriend so I could have an extra set of eyes to make observations. To ensure my own safety, I sat in an area that wasn't in a main walkway. I also did not set my plate of food on the floor, I simply held it in my hand as I ate. I figured I would get some funny looks from my peers, but I predicted that I wouldn't actually receive any comments. In my experience, if I see somebody acting in what is not considered "normal" or traditional behavior, I usually wouldn't directly question them and I would try to mind my own business to avoid being perceived as rude.

I definitely got some strange looks from a few people. It seemed as though people were looking at the furniture around me to assess if there was something wrong with it, which would explain why I wasn't using it. After not seeing anything and remaining confused, everyone just carried on and walked away without questioning it further, as I predicted. One employee, however, spoke up and asked me if I would prefer a chair, to which I replied, "Thank you, but I'm alright." He also looked confused, but left it alone. I think it's very interesting that the only person who made a comment was an employee, which demonstrates how people may act differently when placed in various roles. A fellow student who is there to eat and enjoy themselves could probably care less whether or not somebody is sitting on the floor. But an employee has more responsibility and demonstrates some level of authority, allowing them to feel more comfortable

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making a comment like this.

Overall, I would say that I was exposed to mild negative sanctions, in the form of disapproving glances or comments, for breaking this norm. Other sanctions I could have experienced would be getting told to use the furniture, or even being asked to leave. However, I don't think my behavior would be classified as "taboo" since it wasn't incredibly shocking or in violation of social laws, it was simply just a bit odd.

Another aspect I considered when reflecting on my experiment were Cooley's looking-glass self, which refers to the idea that we define and characterize ourselves based on how others see and react to us (Henslin, 2017). Upon receiving these negative sanctions from my peers, I began to recognize some uncomfortable feelings and thoughts, such as, "Does everyone think I'm weird? Are they going to make fun of me?" Cooley suggested that we internalize the input we receive from others and change our behaviors accordingly in order to become more socially accepted (Henslin, 2017). Even after just a few minutes of breaking a social norm and experiencing mild consequences, I could feel myself becoming uncomfortable with disapproval and wanting to change my behavior.

It is also important to consider the culture in my experiment. College campuses tend to be more laid-back. For example, it's probable that you'll see someone wearing sweats or pajamas to go grab some food at the dining halls. But if someone dressed like that to a five-star restaurant, it would be frowned upon. I think this is another reason why the reactions I experienced were not as severe as they could be. This led me to think about how I could explore this topic further in a different environment.

If I were to repeat this experiment, I would do the same thing but in a slightly fancier restaurant environment. It would be interesting to see how differently people would react in comparison to a more relaxed university dining hall. Additionally, restaurant-culture is highly centered around customer service, so I'm sure the waiter/waitress would be uncomfortable with my choice to sit on the floor. I also imagine that if the restaurant was more high-end, a person may even get kicked out if they refuse to sit in a chair. One thing I would keep the same in my repeat experiment would be making sure to dress fairly nice. I think if I had dressed in sweats or pajamas, people would have unconsciously stereotyped me as someone who is careless or immature, making it seem less odd to see a person like that engaging in abnormal behavior. But, by wearing what is perceived to be "normal" clothing, it limits the amount of variables in the experiment and ensures that people's reactions are only in response to the behavior.

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