

# What came first, the food or the social? An exploration of commensality as a co-occupation for occupational therapy and occupational science: A Scoping Review

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# Food related occupations

- Have allowed fine motor and social skills development since ancient times (Ellerin, 2015a; 2015b)
- “Involve a range of components—physical, mental, social, emotional, environmental, cultural, and spiritual—that shape our identities, and familial and cultural bonds” (CAOT, 2024, p.1)
- Include (CAOT, 2024):
  - Food sourcing – e.g. grocery shopping
  - Food preparation – e.g. cooking with friends
  - **Eating (physical) – e.g., feeding and swallowing**
  - **Eating (mental & emotional) – e.g., comfort eating**
  - **Food and cultural identity (spiritual) – e.g., religious rituals**





Who's eating (and what),  
where, how, why, and with  
whom matter...

Commensality as “the practice  
of eating together”

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(Neuman, 2024, p.557)

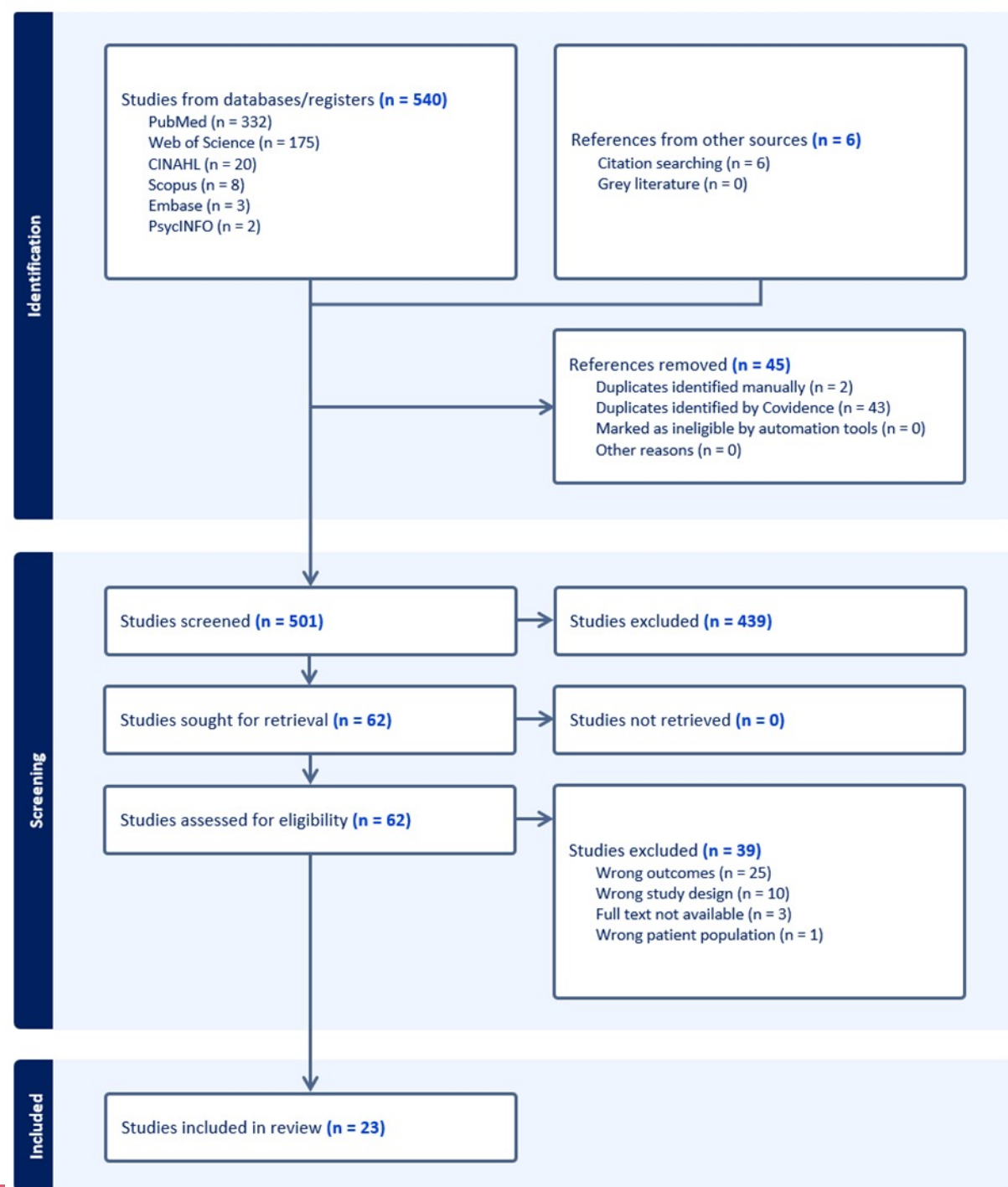


# Objectives

- **Knowledge gap:** While performance and nutritional considerations of eating for growth and development in people have been explored, social aspects of eating have not been equally examined in occupational therapy and occupational science.
- **Objectives:** To explore the use and understanding of commensality as a co-occupation in occupational therapy and occupational science literature.

# Methods

- Joanna Briggs Institute (JBI) methodology for scoping reviews and PRISMA-ScR guidance.
- Databases: Cinahl, Web of Science, Embase, PubMed, Scopus, PsycINFO, SciELO, Cochrane database of systematic reviews.
- Search terms included “occupational therap\*”, “occupational science”, “co-occupation”, “commensality”, “social eating”, and “eating with others”.
- [OSF Scoping Review protocol registration](#)
- Trustworthiness strategies include researcher triangulation and thick description of the methods.



# Results - characterisation

- **Included studies:** 23
- **Year of publication:** 2000-2009 n=1, 2010-2019 n=6, **2020-2026 n=16**
- **Journal of publication:**
  - **Occupational Therapy Journals n=10**
    - Disability related journals n=5
    - Journal of Occupational Science n=4
    - Others n=4
- **Country:** **USA n=9**, Spain n=3, Brazil n=3, Other countries n=8
- **Full text language:** **English n=21**, Spanish n=1, Portuguese n=1
- **Study design:** **Qualitative n=15**, Other n=8
- **Data collection:** **Interviews n=18**, Other n=5



- **Population description:**
  - **Medical conditions/disability n=12**
    - Mothers/families n=5
    - Children/youth n=4
    - Homeless people n=1
    - Older people n=1
- **Setting:** **Home n=11**, School n=4, Clinical setting n=2, Other n=6
- **Discipline:** **Occupational therapy n=12**, Occupational science n=5, Other n=6

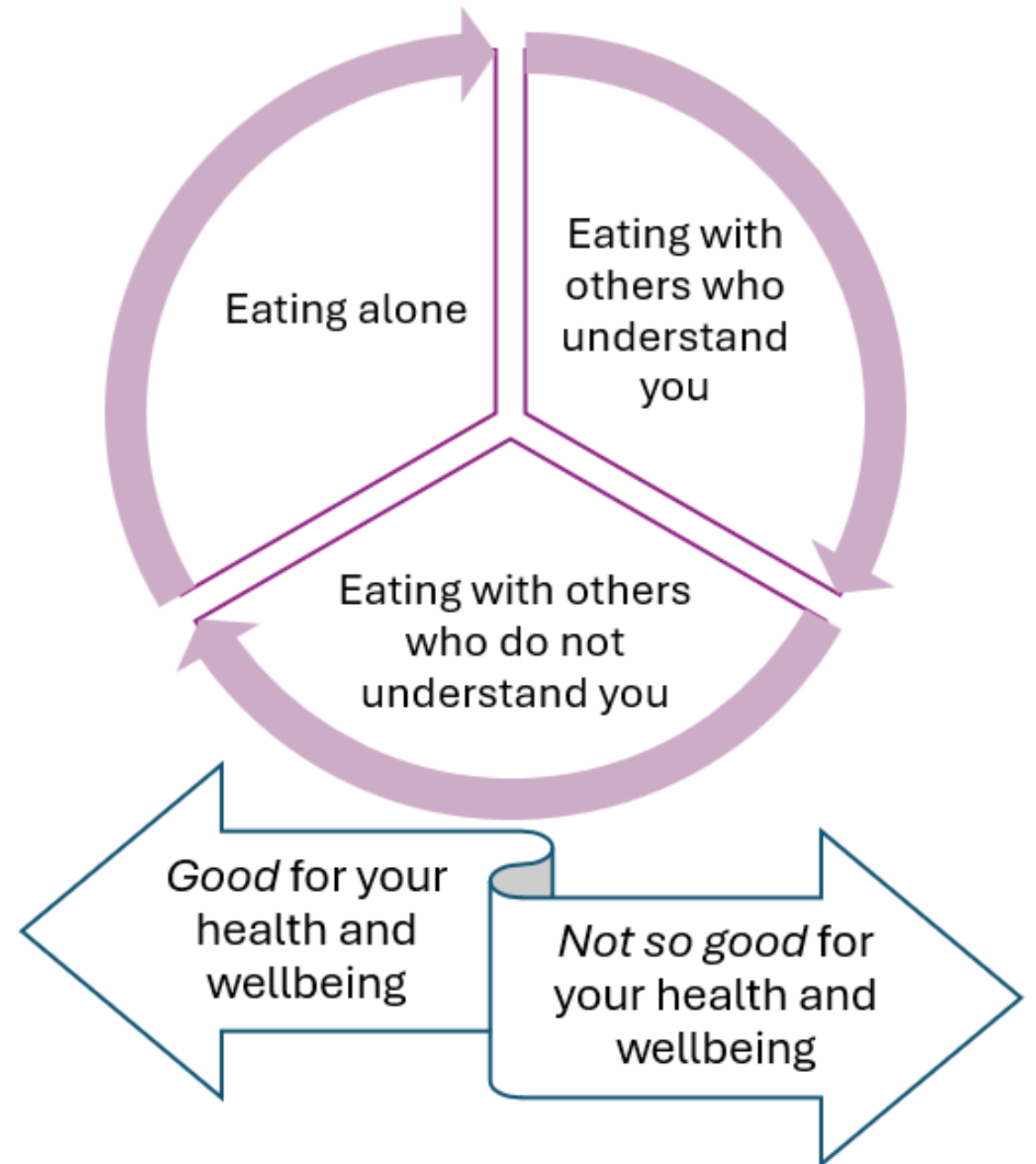
# Definition of social eating (commensality)

- Any type of food, meal, snack, or beverages
- In company of others: **Opportunity for meaningful social interaction**
- Shaped by social roles and expectations
- Frequency, routine and structure (**shared time and space**)
- Intergenerational / learnt with or from others (**shared bond**)
- Connectedness and togetherness
- Impact on health and wellbeing
- *A chore or a joyful occupation*



# Results - content

- **Defining matters, from snacks to meals.**  
Eating with others impact on belongingness, functional goals, social interaction, shared values, and routine structure.
- Commensality shapes the occupation of eating in terms of time, utensils, and space, not only social interactions.
- **When eating with others is good for your health and wellbeing**
  - Cultural considerations
  - Mental health
- **When eating with others is not so good for your health and wellbeing**
  - People living with a disability
  - Cancer survivors
  - People living on the streets
- **Eating alone as a choice or as a risk for your health**
  - Culinary Loneliness (Cipriano-Crespo et al, 2022)



# Implications for practice and future research

- Eating with others as the *main* or as a *side dish* (in research and practice).
- The future of eating together: technology and distance.
- Expand the focus of our practice around eating, beyond functional considerations and assistive equipment.
- Commensality as an opportunity for social prescribing in occupational therapy (Sonke et al, 2023).
- The need to explore occupations we might be taking for granted.



# Conclusion

- For **occupational therapy**, these findings can expand the considerations of how the social aspects of eating can support innovative person-centered approaches for daily occupations in a more situated manner.
- For **occupational science**, understanding the implications of commensality will support the growing need to understand co-occupations beyond caregiving.



# References

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