Ever have a food attraction? Food sharing may be used for mate attraction, sexual access, or mate retention in humans, as in many other species. Adult humans tend to perceive more intimacy in a couple if feeding is observed, but the increased perceived intimacy may be due to resource provisioning rather than feeding per se. To address this issue, 210 university students watched five short videos, each showing a different mixed-sex pair of adults dining together and including feeding or simple provisioning or no food sharing. A survey concerning attraction and intimacy in the dyad was completed after each video. Both provisioning and feeding produced higher ratings of “Involvement,” with feeding producing the highest ratings. Similarly, the perceived attraction of each actor to the other was lowest when no food sharing was shown and highest when feeding was displayed. These findings are consistent with a view of feeding as a courtship display in humans. Closest to home, genetically speaking, exchanging food for sex has been reported in both bonobos and common chimpanzees.

More recently, Alley (2012) used a set of 25 videotapes showing mixed-sex dyads (actors) sharing a meal in a restaurant. These observers gave higher ratings of both attraction and intimacy when one person was shown feeding the other. Moreover, the Hum Nat (2013) 24:430–443 highest ratings of intimacy and attraction were produced when they were seen feeding “contaminated” food (i.e., food with potential germ transference). Overall, then, the results consistently indicate that a single incident of feeding in mixed-sex dyads promotes the impression of an intimate relationship (Alley 2012).

Both theory and research support the idea that mixed-sex pairs of adults feeding food to one another is often taken as indicative of intimacy, especially when the food appears to be contaminated with the feeder’s germs. The likely presence of germs makes “contaminated” food sharing in some ways equivalent to mouth-to-mouth kissing (Alley 2012).

References