

Cooking, Convenience and Dis-Connection

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In popular UK commentary and much academic and policy discussion, home-cooking ‘from scratch’, from ‘real’, ‘non-prepared foods’ is viewed as grounded in learned knowledge, skilful and vital to family well-being and identity. Using ‘pre-prepared’ ‘convenience foods’ on the other hand is usually portrayed oppositionally, as lacking in skill, individualistic and atomising. ‘Pre-prepared foods’ are regularly presented as destroying processes of acquiring cooking skills, handing down food cultures and connecting generations. Parents who can’t cook cannot pass on food knowledge and abilities to their children. Drawing on research that provides insight into the different ways of knowing, approaching and practising cooking this paper will challenge current discourse. It will argue that ‘convenience foods’ play an important role in the intergenerational transference of skills, that ‘convenience foods’ can be seen as inclusive and connecting.

Dis-Connection and the Decline of Cooking, the ‘Common Sense’ View

Though it has often been argued by those working in the social sciences that there is little if any supportive data,¹ over the last ten years or so there has been a growing ‘common sense’ understanding in the UK, particularly amongst food writers, social commentators and policy makers, that people’s cooking skills are in decline. The death of cooking has been foretold.² A half hour or so looking through a selection of popular, news-based and government department websites reveals numerous references that accept without debate ‘the endangered status of home cooking’,³ that ‘these days it’s not so much won’t cook as can’t’⁴. The London Development Agency’s ‘Better for London’ strategy is not alone in failing to consider questioning that ‘the way in which we prepare, cook and eat food has changed rapidly in the past twenty years, with a decline in cooking from scratch and family meals, and an expansion in “single eating” and ready meals.’ ‘There is’, it tells us emphatically but without reference, ‘persuasive evidence that the decline of cooking skills – both nationally and in London – has, amongst other things, played an important role in disconnecting the public from food...’⁵

The cause of the deskilling of home cooking is generally and ‘naturally’ assumed to be the increased availability and use of ‘pre-prepared’ ‘convenience foods’ and kitchen equipment such as microwaves, food processors and deep-fat fryers. ‘Convenience foods’ are more often than not regarded as negative, atomising and dis-connecting. A whole range of foods can now be eaten without the need of a skilled cook the argument goes, ‘pre-prepared foods’ render the role of the home cook defunct. ‘Non-convenience’, ‘real food’ and ‘real cooking’ on the other hand are ‘naturally’ assumed to be important in connecting families, in giving identity, meaning and structure – even if this is most usually unqualified and unsupported. In a recent article for the Guardian newspaper for example, Rosie Boycott, one time founder of Spare Rib, the 1970s radical feminist magazine that offered on subscription a dishcloth that read ‘First you sink into his arms, then you arms end up in his sink’, advocated that ‘a woman’s place *is* in the kitchen.’ (The italics are Boycott’s.) ‘Not only has home cooking declined’, she tells us, ‘but in many households pre-assembled dishes are consumed individually, all over the house, when and where family members want. Food – once something that brought adults and children together around the kitchen table – is now’, she says, ‘yet another way to avoid family life.’⁶ Historian Felipe Fernandez-Armesto, in another article for the same newspaper tells us that ‘we are facing [...] a dystopia in which cooking has surrendered to “convenience” and family break-ups start at the fridge.’ ‘In microwave households’, he says, ‘family life fragments’. ‘People eat while they are doing other things, with eyes averted from company.’ ‘They snack in the street, trailing litter, spreading smell pollution and dropping fodder for rats.’ Not that it’s all bad. ‘Cooking will revive’, he argues,

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- 1 See for example, Dickinson, R. and Leader, S. (1998), ‘Ask the family’, in Griffiths, S. and Wallace, J. (eds.), *Consuming Passions, Food in the Age of Anxiety*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, pp. 122 – 129 and Sutton, D. (2001), *Remembrance of Repasts, An Anthropology of Food and Memory*, Oxford: Berg Publishers.
 - 2 Fort, M. (2003) ‘The death of cooking’, in the *Guardian*, May 10th, available www.guardian.co.uk/food/focus/story/0,951915,00.html
 - 3 Blythman, Joanne (2006), ‘Bad food Britain’, in the *Daily Mail*, June 3rd, available www.dailymail.co.uk/pages/livearticles/news/news.html?in_article_id=3889118in_page_id=1770
 - 4 Karpf, Anne (2007), ‘Task for 2007; must teach my children to cook’, in the *Guardian*, January 6th, available <http://www.guardian.co.uk/family/story/0,,1982987,00.html>
 - 5 London Development Agency (2005), *Better food for London: The Mayor’s Draft*, food strategy report available www.lda.gov.uk
 - 6 Boycott, R. (2007), ‘Why a woman’s place *is* in the kitchen’ in the *Guardian*, 26th April, pp. 12 – 15.

'because it is inseparable from humanity.' 'Home', Fernandez-Armesto concludes, 'is a place that smells of cooking.'⁷

In this construction 'pre-prepared' 'convenience foods' (junk foods, packet foods, processed foods ...) – Boycott refers to frozen peas, pastry, pies and complete packaged meals, Fernandez-Armesto to baked beans and sandwiches, both mention pot-noodles – are seen as not only morally inferior but also distinctly opposite and 'other' to some notion of 'real' non-packaged, non-convenience foods. In turn, cooking with 'real foods' is one thing, cooking with 'convenience foods' or 'prepared foods' is quite another. 'Cooking from scratch' with 'real foods' requires skill and knowledge. Using 'convenience' and 'pre-prepared foods' is about little more than assembly. Cook School, a food education magazine published for the UK Food Standards Agency approved Focus on Food Campaign informs us, again without clear reference, of how 'more than two-thirds of children say they would like to learn to cook.' Yet 'sadly', 'most twenty-first century children's cooking knowledge is limited to putting together meals or snacks from pre-prepared ingredients, and their understanding of the cooking process confined mainly to what a microwave can do in seconds.'⁸

Using these kinds of foods and technologies is seen as requiring somehow lesser, even distinct and opposite skills than those needed to cook with 'real' 'non-convenience' foods. In debates about the deskilling and decline of cooking, those who use pre-prepared foods are seen as not having the chance to learn to cook 'properly' and therefore as not being able to acquire 'real', 'traditional' cooking skills.⁹ It is some undefined collection of 'basic cooking skills' connected with 'cooking from scratch' that are viewed as a 'life skill',¹⁰ some very much unspecified set of 'traditional cooking skills'¹¹ that is seen as being in decline:

With the changes in eating habits over the last twenty years, it can be argued that traditional cooking skills – that is taking raw ingredients and turning them into complete culturally appropriate dishes – may be becoming redundant.¹²

A further 'common sense' argument about the dis-connecting role of 'convenience foods' and modern kitchen technologies is that they are integral not only to the deskilling of domestic cooks and cooking but also to the destruction of the process of cooking skills and knowledge being passed from one generation to the next. Julia Barratt, a director of the Chartered Institute of Environmental Health, for example, has said that 'the skills of preparing healthy meals from fresh ingredients have been undermined by the popularity of convenience foods. So girls are too often not learning cooking skills from their mothers and with the disappearance of home economics from schools we're faced with a generation and a half of

7 Fernandez-Armesto, F. (2002), 'Meals make us human', in the *Guardian*, September 4th, available www.guardian.co.uk/comment/story/0,3604,791966,00.html

8 *Cook School. The Food Education Magazine* (2007), Vol. 6, Issue 1, April, p. 76.

9 See, for example, Ritzer, G. (1996), *The McDonaldization of Society*, Thousand Oaks, California: Pine Forge Press; Fieldhouse, P. (1995), *Food and Nutrition, Customs and Culture*, London: Chapman and Hall; and Mintz, S. (1996), *Tasting Food, Tasting Freedom: Excursions into Eating, Culture and the Past*, Boston: Beacon Press.

10 See DFES (2007), *Johnson announces multi-million pound package to improve school food and fight childhood obesity*, available www.dfes.gov.uk/pns/DisplayPN.cgi?pn_id2006_0121 and BBC, (2007), 'Anger over cookery classes move', available <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/education/6324887.stm>

11 See, for example, Arnot, C. (2001), 'Diet pep talks', in the *Guardian*, Wednesday 25th July, available www.guardian.co.uk/Archive/Article/0,4273,4227079,00.html and Dillon, S. (2004), speaking on BBC Radio 4's *Food Programme*, February 8th, available www.bbc.co.uk/radio4/factual/foodprogramme_20040208.shtml

12 Caraher, M. and Lang, T. (2001), 'Is there a culinary skills transition? Data and debate from the UK about changes in cooking culture', in the *Journal of the Home Economics Institute of Australia*, p. 5.

young people who simply cannot prepare healthy meals'.¹³ Similarly, Prue Leith, chair of the government's School Food Trust has said on more than one occasion that promoting the teaching of cooking in schools – in UK public health and educational policy teaching practical cooking skills is widely accepted as a way of combating the 'decline of cooking' and increased use of convenience foods – is a clear response to the fact that today 'mums and dads can't cook'.¹⁴

Challenging the Common Sense Constructions and Natural Logics that Surround Debates About the Decline of Cooking and the Dis-Connecting Nature of Convenience Foods

In the social sciences a more analytical and theoretically grounded approach to the study of food practices and choices is often taken. Extending this approach to cooking makes it possible to unpack and examine these accepted, 'common sense' 'truths'. In this paper I will draw on an in-depth qualitative examination of domestic cooking approaches, practices and skills¹⁵ to put forward two arguments. First, that the skill/s associated with using, and the dis-connecting nature of, 'convenience foods' have been both oversimplified and over-exaggerated. Secondly, that 'convenience foods' can be seen as connecting.

The De-Skilling and Dis-Connecting Nature of Convenience Foods Have Been Oversimplified and Over-Exaggerated

In UK social commentary and policy recommendations, cooking skills are rarely if ever clearly defined or described in any detail. They are most usually constructed simply, as being practical, functional, a means to an end. 'Cooking skills' are regularly portrayed and interpreted as a set of delineated techniques and technical competencies such as grilling, chopping vegetables, stir frying, making a white sauce, cooking pasta al dente and so on.¹⁶

It could be argued that any understanding of the concept of 'cooking skills' is, of course, dependent on how 'cook' is interpreted. And interpretations, it seems, vary both widely and wildly. Whilst dictionary definitions lie more in the area of 'to prepare something to eat by

13 Frith, M. (2006), 'Food "fraudsters" claim credit for ready meals', in *The Independent*, 9th January, available http://enjoyment.independent.co.uk/food_and_drink/news/article337404.ece

14 Meikle, J. (2006), 'Prue Leith to oversee school meals reform', in the *Guardian*, Friday November 10, available <http://education.guardian.co.uk/schoolmeals/story/0,,1944293,00.html> and Leith, P. (2001), 'Choice for children', in *Resurgence*, No. 205, available <http://resurgence.gn.apc.org/issues/leith205.htm>

15 The study, forming part of my doctoral degree, was carried out for the Centre for Food Policy, then at Thames Valley University (now at City University), London. A qualitative study of domestic cooking approaches, practices and skills it drew on post-structural theories of taste and identity as well as Marxist and feminist perspectives on work, leisure, skill and social value. As well as exploring the identifications and voices of people who cook the study also looked at common, shared approaches to domestic cooking and cooking skills as well as the influence of both approaches and skills on food choices and practices (ie. 'cooking from scratch' and use of 'convenience foods'). Other aspects of the study are discussed elsewhere. See, *Domestic cooking and cooking skills in late twentieth century England* (2002), unpublished thesis. See also Domestic Cooking Skills – What are They? (2003), in the *Journal of the Australian Institute of Home Economics*, 10:3, pp. 13 – 22; Domestic cooking practices and cooking skills: findings from an English study (2003), in *Food Service Technology*, 3, 3 / 4, pp. 177 – 185 and Cooks, Culinary Ability and Convenience Food: Findings from a UK Study (2003), in *Petits Propos Culinaires 73*. Totnes: Prospect Books. See also, *Kitchen Secrets, The Meaning of Cooking in Everyday Life*, (2006), Berg: Oxford, UK.

16 See for example, Lang, T., Caraher, M., Dixon, P. and Carr-Hill, R. (1999), *Cooking Skills and Health*, London: The Health Education Authority; Nestle Family Monitor (2001), No 13, *Eating and Today's Lifestyle*, research by MORI; and Nicolaas, G. (1995), *Cooking, Attitudes and Behaviour*, produced on behalf of the Nutrition Task Force for the Department of Health UK, London: Crown Copyright. See also, for example, British Nutrition Foundation (2007), BNF Food Life Skills, available www.nutrition.org.uk/home.asp?siteId=438sectionId=1130&parentSection=300&which=2

application of heat/energy' type, food writer Cherry Ripe asserts that the meaning of 'cook' is 'to prepare food by scratch'. It 'has nothing to do with 'following the numbered pictograms on the back of a packet, and microwaving for x minutes' she says.¹⁷ This somewhat divisive type of interpretation is hinted at too in Caraher and Lang's discussion of their 'culinary skills transition' theory in which they argue that 'existing technological developments have already had an influence on the home, reducing the maximum cooking skills needed to those of simply re-heating and assembly'.¹⁸ The approach here reflecting 'common sense' arguments (discussed above) that 'convenience cooking' requires some lesser type of skill. Sociologist Anne Murcott's position on the meaning of cook however, is very different. She directs us towards thinking about the way 'cook' can be interpreted as referring to the household task of cooking – of making food, food provision - a task like ironing, shopping and so on.¹⁹ In a similar way, Luce Giard focuses, rather like Murcott, on 'doing cooking' and the very varied skills of French women home cooks, their 'constant calculation of timings and budgets and endless adjustments to the environment and ingredients, social demands and people's likes, dislikes and diets'.²⁰

Others academics have pointed out that technological advances can be seen not as 'dumbing down' domestic cooking, but as increasing expected standards and demanding greater competencies. Microwaves and food processors do not necessarily, it has been argued, make cooking simpler and encourage deskilling. Elizabeth Silva has made the point that microwave ovens tend only to be used as 're-heaters' and 'defrosters' and have never replaced thermostatically controlled gas or electric ovens as was originally intended. Perhaps, she suggests, this is because 'cooking from scratch' with a microwave, as opposed to re-heating or defrosting, requires greater skills and/or a more skilled cook than cooking with a more 'traditional' oven.²¹ Arguing that technological 'advances' often increase expectations and hence workloads, Ruth Schwartz Cowan describes how in nineteenth century America the widespread adoption of the stove in place of the open hearth led not to less time cooking, but more. With the 'new' stove it was possible to bake a pie, boil vegetables and make a soup all at the same time and this increasingly became what was expected on a daily basis. The technically simpler and much less time consuming one-pot stews and spoon breads of the open hearth system were no longer seen as appropriate or sufficient daily fare.²²

Drawing on Murcott and Giard's interpretation of 'cook', the issues raised by Schwartz Cowan, Silva and others and the more extended, analytical approach to skill taken by industrial sociologists and workplace analysts,²³ my own qualitative research found that people's cooking skills can be understood as owing little either to the techniques and practical competencies often listed on educational websites and in policy based research or to their construction as either 'assembly' skills or 'traditional' skills. Talking with people who cook

17 Ripe, C. (1993), *Goodbye Culinary Cringe*, St. Leonards: Allen and Unwin.

18 Caraher, M. and Lang, T. (2001), *Is there a culinary skills transition?* (note xii).

19 Murcott, A. 'Raw, cooked and proper meals at home', in Marshall, D. W. (ed.), *Food Choice and the Consumer*, Glasgow: Blackie and Academic.

20 Short, F. (2006), *Kitchen Secrets*, (note xv), p. 54 referring to de Certeau, M., Giard, L. and Mayol, P. (1998), *The Practice of Everyday Life. Volume 3: Living and Cooking*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

21 Silva, E. B. (2000), 'The cook, the cooker and the gendering of the kitchen', in *Sociological Review*, vol. 48, No. 4, pp.612 – 627.

22 Schwartz Cowan, R. (1983), *More Work for Mother. The Ironies of Household Technology from the Open Hearth to the Microwave*, New York: Basic Books.

23 There is little room to explore this approach in this paper but see for example, Pinch, T., Collins, H. M. and Corbone, L. (1996), 'Inside knowledge: second order measures of skill', in *Sociological Review*, Vol. 44, No. 6, pp. 163 – 186; Singleton, W. T. (1978), *The Study of Real Skills. Volume 1 The Analysis of Practical Skills*, Lancaster: MTP Press; and Wellens, J. (1974), *Training in Physical Skills*, London: Business Books. See also, for a discussion, *Kitchen Secrets* and other papers based on this study (note xv).

reveals the existence, the use and importance, of tacit perceptual, conceptual, emotional and organisational knowledges and abilities. These knowledges and abilities are numerous but include such skills as understanding others preferences and needs, relating consistencies of raw foods to the final 'cooked' versions and managing resources of time, finances and individual know-how. Further, I have found that greater insight into the place of cooking in wider food practices such as family identity and well-being is possible if a more detailed, expansive interpretation and understanding of cooking skill is taken.

A particularly useful position to take I have found is to consider the nature of cooking skills in two different ways – as being task-centred (disembodied) or person-centred (embodied). A task-centred approach to the skills of making, for example, a white sauce would focus on practical techniques such as weighing out ingredients, melting butter, pouring milk, stirring and mixing or using a wooden spoon. It may also consider tacit abilities to judge the best time to add the milk or 'know' when the sauce is 'thick enough'. A person-centred approach however takes context into account. A cook making white sauce for a lasagne may be doing so on a quiet Sunday afternoon when no-one else is in the kitchen. The ingredients have been bought specially and the recipe being followed is in plain view. The cook is keen for the lasagne to be 'good', the white sauce to be 'lump free'. There is however, ample time before the diners expect to be told the meal is ready – timing, therefore, is more or less in the hands of the cook. A different cook may be making the sauce on a Tuesday evening. Dinner needs to be ready promptly as another member of the family is going out and younger family members are running in and out of the kitchen claiming to be starving. And though the cauliflower that needed to be used up (hence the sauce) proves to be rather past its best, no one will mind if the sauce has a couple of lumps. These two cooks will use some of the same skills – simmering, stirring, judging when the sauce is 'thick enough' and so on. However, because they are cooking in very different contexts, with different resources and expectations, they will also each use skills that are more specific to their situation and that particular experience – different organisational and emotional skills for example.

A more sophisticated interpretation of cooking skills such as this is important when it comes to deconstructing the logic that it is 'naturally' and 'logically' 'convenience foods' that are responsible for the (assumed) decline of cooking, the dis-connection of family food practices. Once the meaning of cooking skills is opened up in this way it becomes problematic to approach 'convenience cooking skills' and 'traditional', 'real cooking skills' as being somehow different, never mind two distinct types. An approach that acknowledges context and tacit competencies shows that the skills to make, for example, pasta with a chilled, pre-prepared tomato sauce can be seen as including more than simple assembly. Such skills may include boiling the pasta and judging when it is 'cooked', simmering and stirring the sauce and making sure it doesn't stick to the pan or bubble over the bowl (if in the microwave).²⁴ In the particular context of a weekday family meal, for example, skills may also include perhaps, cooking whilst also washing up the plates from breakfast, getting to the front door to let in late arrivals and being aware of exactly where the two-year old is when the boiling water is drained from the pasta. The skills used may not be as great or many as when making a sauce from fresh tomatoes and preparing pasta from scratch, from flour and eggs, yet they are also neither wholly negligible nor entirely different.

The split between 'convenience skills' and 'real, traditional skills' is even more difficult to locate when the difficulty of drawing a clear line between 'convenience foods' and 'real foods' is acknowledged. This difficulty became quickly apparent during my study of domestic cooking practices. I found that people who cook do use terms and phrases like 'packet', 'convenience', 'ready-made', 'ready-prepared' and 'processed', yet there is very little

24 Based on foods prepared and experiences of cooking recounted by informants who took part in the study that informs this paper.

consistency in the way that they do so. ‘Prepared’ for example can be used in referring to, or be understood as referring to, such different foods as a ready-to-heat chicken tikka masala and a jointed, skinned raw fillet of chicken. Foods that may be labelled as ‘processed’ or ‘convenience’ in commentary and debate such as baked beans, mayonnaise, packet cereals etc are more often treated by people who cook, I have found, as ‘real’ foods. Foods, that is, that at least on an everyday basis – special occasions can be different – they would never consider making. As with vegeburgers, jam, mustard, pickle and marmalade, fruit yoghurts and desserts, spice mixes and pastes, ice-cream, sausages, biscuits and crackers, bread, pasta, and so on, their use is considered by people who cook absolutely normal and acceptable, just part of the practice of preparing, cooking and feeding:

Cooking today means a heterogeneous mix of the fresh, the raw and the pre-prepared, the new and the traditional, the technological and the manual. As Tayla described, fresh eggs, white granulated sugar, pre-weighed butter, a packet of biscuits, a hand-held electric whisk, a by-hand lemon squeezer and state-of-the-art convection oven combine to make lemon meringue pie ‘from scratch’. John bakes a piece of gammon and then slices and serves it with pre-washed salad leaves, pre-graded but home boiled eggs and store-bought pickled beetroot from a jar for a ham salad. Jaclyn makes speedy salmon coulubiatic from organically produced fresh salmon filleted in the supermarket, and a packet of frozen, bought puff pastry, which she cuts beautifully into leaf shapes for decoration.²⁵

Talking to people who cook I found that drawing a definite and distinct line between morally good connecting foods and superior ‘real cooking skills’ and morally poor disconnecting ‘convenience foods’ and inferior ‘assembly skills’, proved to be neither possible nor true to the findings of the study. The language and understanding of domestic cooking regularly used in social commentary, educational, food and public health policy does not ‘fit’, and hence allow insight into, the practice itself, the lived experiences and approaches of people who cook.

Convenience Foods Can Connect

In my studies²⁶ I have found people who cook differentiate not between ‘cooking from scratch’ and ‘convenience cooking’, as many commentators and policy makers do, but between ‘proper cooking’ and everyday ‘doing the cooking’. ‘Proper cooking’ is that which happens on more ‘important’ cooking occasions. Often, when people want to refer to a kind of cooking they consider (more) ‘proper’ they use emphasis and intonation. As Jules put it, ‘we cook things that are sort of easy and straightforward during the week but at the weekend we try and *cook*’. For Claire, if she’s on her own, cooking is just about making food, it’s not about *proper* cooking. ‘If I’m cooking for myself I’ll just cook pasta and have it with pesto’, she said, ‘I very rarely *cook* for myself. I never really experiment *cooking-wise*’. Put briefly, cooking occasions are hierarchical. Evening meals are more important than those earlier in the day, guests win out over family, adults over children. Weekend food is higher up the hierarchy than weekday food, holiday occasions tend to be thought more important than non-holiday, work-time occasions. A Saturday evening dinner for friends is far more likely to be an ‘important cooking occasion’ than a Tuesday breakfast. It is equally far more likely to involve ‘proper cooking’ than it is ‘everyday cooking’. ‘Proper cooking’ entails (an

25 Short, F. *Kitchen Secrets* (note xv), pp. 114 – 115. Based on foods prepared and experiences of cooking recounted by informants who took part in the study that informs this paper.

26 I have recently started developing a study of the transference of cooking skills from one generation to another and am currently analysing data from a series of pilot interviews.

appropriate degree of) effort. Effort means making a special shopping trip, using a recipe perhaps, devoting more time to the cooking task, maybe using more complex techniques or longer cooking methods, preparing a more favoured and infrequently made dish and so on. Effort can also be associated with using more highly valued food and ingredients. This means that on these kinds of more important cooking occasions a higher proportion of 'raw' 'real' foods is more likely to be used. (However, using a greater quantity of 'real', 'non-convenience foods' is not *necessarily* part of cooking properly. Cooking for guests, Patrick will always make a proper stock, Liz feels an oxo cube (bouillon) will do. For Mark, proud of his 'quite mean Carbonara', one of the only things he has ever 'really *cooked*', a packet of dried Carbonara sauce mix will suffice. It is at the weekend and particularly if friends are visiting said Moh, an ex-chef and restaurant manager, that he may enjoy preparing a dessert 'from scratch'. Though he is just as likely, he added, to buy something nice from the patisserie round the corner.) Everyday 'doing the cooking' on the other hand is more likely to involve a higher proportion of those foods often labelled 'pre-prepared' or 'convenience'.²⁷

It is here that I would like to put forward the argument that everyday 'doing the cooking' can be seen as more 'connecting' than 'proper cooking'. I have found that people are more likely to involve children when they are cooking on 'less important' occasions, say breakfast, lunch or weekday evening meals, with 'less important' foods. On these kinds of occasions when a higher quantity of less valued 'convenience foods' are used (say a pre-prepared tomato sauce and dried pasta, as above), people have less interest, less personal and emotional attachment to the process or result of cooking. Cooking on these occasions is less individualistic, there is less desire from the cook for the meal to be seen as 'theirs', less desire or need to enjoy the process of cooking. Children are more likely to be allowed to 'muck in':

Occasionally I'll try and get her involved if she's keen to help. I mean she can do things like open a tin or I'll let her stir the beans or something but nothing more adventurous than that. Elspeth

This argument can then be taken further. For the findings of my research show that it is those who identify more strongly with being the 'everyday cook', those who are more likely to use a higher proportion of 'convenience foods', that are most likely to let their children 'help out' or get involved in the cooking. (Note that cooking with children for recreation or with specific intention of passing on skills, say making bread or cakes or following a recipe from a children's cookery book, involves a very different set of relationships and influences.²⁸) Cooks with this personal approach, those who view cooking more as a 'job to be done' than a form of potentially identity-giving recreation, are less concerned with the product of cooking being considered as the end result of their (individual) effort, their skills:²⁹

Keeley, who's one, often sits on the work surface whilst I cook and she helps me. She's always really interested in how things are cooking. If they're in the microwave she wants to watch ... she wants to watch it till it pings and she wants to watch things under the grill. I think they're both a bit young really [she also has a five year old son] to learn to cook but if you ask them to go and 'find the pasta' or 'find some eggs' or 'find some crisps' they would both know where they were stored and what you did with them.

27 The hierarchy of cooking occasions and guidelines for food choices and cooking practices for those occasions is explored more fully in *Kitchen Secrets* (note xv) in the chapter 'What do Cooks Think of Cooking?' which looks at shared cultural approaches to domestic cooking.

28 These different ways of cooking with children are being explored in a new study. See note xxvi.

29 Personal approaches to domestic cooking and being a cook are explored more fully in *Kitchen Secrets* (note xv) in the chapter 'What is a Cook?'

They're both quite well aware of what food you need to cook and what food you don't need to cook or what I keep in the freezer and why things need to be in the fridge. Liz

Those who saw themselves as 'interested cooks' and 'keen cooks', though more likely to use a higher quantity of 'non-convenience, real foods' and 'cook from scratch', were also more likely to want to cook alone. And not therefore, with their children. For these cooks there is often more 'tied up' in the process of cooking, a process they see as enjoyable, satisfying and a source of achievement, a process they either do not want to share, do not feel that should have to share or do not feel they can share. Margaret, someone who might be called an experienced 'good cook', (and someone who 'common sense' would say is perhaps the kind of cook 'connected' with her family's food practices) told me how she enjoys the process of cooking. She likes the fiddley little tasks, trying out new ingredients, the time to think and the sense of accomplishment. Yet as a consequence she 'admitted' (for she felt rather guilty about it), she finds cooking with her children rather tiresome:

When you cook with children you have to mind about not doing things properly. You have to just enjoy it and hope things come out edible and I'm not terribly good at that.
Margaret

Like Margaret, Jim also liked to cook. He too saw it as something about which he has a particular 'interest'. Yet Jim worked at home and as a result often found himself taking on some of the everyday cooking (he had children aged one and four who would often be at home at the same time). Even if he felt some of the same kind of annoyance that Margaret did, the aggrieved relinquishing of a potentially enjoyable and satisfying cooking experience, and didn't generally do so on special occasions, Jim would often let his four year old daughter help out with making breakfast or lunch. On these lesser cooking occasions it wasn't too bad. 'You have to make her think she's really helping without really giving her the important bits to do' he explained. Eric had no such problems. 'Not interested' in cooking, Eric was usually only involved in making the occasional sandwich or Sunday fried breakfast. Yet Eric spoke without any obvious awareness of how it might be either potentially enjoyable or perhaps dissatisfying to let his daughter collect the ingredients, unwrap packets and perch on a stool to see the food sliced, chopped and cooked under the grill. Entirely ambivalent about the practice of cooking, Eric was also entirely ambivalent about involving his daughter in the process.

In Conclusion, Considerations for Future Research

In current food debate, individualisation is a motif most usually associated with eating and 'convenience foods'. Microwaves, takeaways and 'pre-prepared foods' are regularly seen as atomising and disconnecting, an encouragement to family members to graze and snack separately throughout the day, governed only by their own schedules. Despite that it often means the dismissal of others from the kitchen, the individualised nature of 'proper' cooking, cooking that has taken on a recreational leisure-focused slant, remains largely ignored. I would argue that this is because, not only is there a deficit of research, but that this is the kind of cooking that tends to be 'naturally' most highly valued. I have found that both informants to my research and social commentators rarely associate cooking skill/s, good cooks and cooking with such as abilities as feeding a family on a budget, self-provisioning, being time efficient or encouraging children to eat. Rather, the 'creative cooking ideal'³⁰ pervades home cooking practices. The common sense view that constructs skilful cooking as being about

30 A concept originally examined by Anne Oakley. See Oakley, A. (1985), *The Sociology of Housework*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell.

technical success (or failure), being creative and ‘professional’, making ‘different and interesting’ food and so on obscures the ways in which it can also be disconnecting and exclusive. Policy and commentary persists down an assumed and unexamined path because dominant discourses naturalise the ‘creative cooking ideal’ and the meaning of cooking skill (being able to cook) making it difficult to put forward an argument that this is an area of everyday culture worth researching.³¹

For some of my informants ‘pre-prepared convenience foods’ are seen as obviously liberating. Kate and Dean both feel that pre-prepared food gives them more time to interact, bond and connect with their children because they free them from the chore of cooking. Kate, a ‘real ready meal user’ (as she put it) was quick to say that she would rather be in the garden playing with her two boys than standing in the kitchen cooking for them. Dean laughed at the idea of he and his partner returning home from work to cook rather than ‘hang out’ with their young son. My findings however suggest that ‘convenience foods’ can also be connecting in more subtle ways. Using pre-prepared foods can mean less concern for the cook about ‘getting it right’, about the food being a reflection of their skills and effort. People who cook care far less, I have found, about whether the butter cake made from a packet mix has risen as perfectly as that which they have made ‘from scratch’. They’re not bothered about the technical standard achieved when they’re preparing beans on toast or making a casserole from a couple of frozen chicken breasts and a jar of mushroom pasta sauce. This kind of cooking can of course be less satisfying for the cook than ‘cooking from scratch’ because the result is far less a reflection of their ability, expertise or the effort they have taken. But as a less emotional, less individualised cooking experience, it can also be one that is more inclusive.

Further research is required but my findings suggest that the neutrality of ‘convenience foods’ (‘everyday cooking’ and less ‘interested’ cooks) can be seen as positive and connecting. It could be that they allow, even encourage, children and young people into the (their parent’s/s’?) kitchen. Certainly it seems an area worth exploring, particularly as analysis of cooking skills shows that ‘convenience foods’ do not necessarily have to be seen as skill-free, as merely requiring assembly. Maureen, a cook managing on a strict budget but who prefers to ‘cook from scratch’ whenever she can (her freezer is loaded with bargains she has picked up at the fruit and vegetable market, frozen fish and cheap cuts of meat) told me that she is far more likely to make a cake with her son if they use a ‘packet mix’. Cake mixes encourage her to bake with him, she said, because they suit his short child’s concentration span, mean less washing up and provide lots of little packages that they both enjoy opening. And he still gets to mix, spread, stir and fold ingredients. It could be argued too that rather than dis-connect and deskill, they help him learn to cook. With a ‘packet mix’, just as with a more ‘traditional’ method, he can acquire cooking skills. He can learn how to appreciate different textures, become acquainted with using an oven, smell a cake baking and judge when it’s ready.

Policy should perhaps not immediately abandon it’s approach that ‘cooking from scratch’ is socially and culturally important. My research does show however that it would be insightful and useful to move beyond common sense assumption and systematically explore how food choices and cooking practices connect and dis-connect with family well-being, social identity and the transference of food cultures across generations. These connections are not simple. Had her mother lived today Rosie Boycott tells us, she would undoubtedly have filled her shopping trolley with ready meals, pre-prepared ‘beef bourguignon’ Lancashire hot pot, even a salmon fillet tastefully wrapped in flaky pastry’: food that would expand her repertoire ‘without the bother of handling raw meat’. A disconnecting food experience for some, but in her mother’s case, Boycott tells us, one she would have considered as very

31 These ideas are explored more fully in *Kitchen Secrets* (note xv).

positive. 'She would not even have had to wonder about the living cow or sheep that had formed the basis of the dish, how it had lived and, more importantly to my mother, how it had died.'