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"I'm a real catch": The blurring of alternative and hegemonic masculinities in men's talk about home cooking

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SYNOPSIS

Domestic cooking has been the subject of foundational feminist work on how gender inequality is reproduced in the everyday activities of the home (e.g. DeVault, 1991). This work shows that notions of "men" and "women" are symbolically reproduced through women's foodwork. Though some men have assumed more responsibility in the domestic kitchen over the past few decades, little attention has been devoted to how masculinities might be affected by changing gender roles around food. Following traditional divisions of labour, scholarly attention remains largely on women's cooking in the home and men's cooking in the professional realm. The research presented here is an attempt to address this gap. I use interviews, meal diaries and observations from thirty men living in Toronto, Canada with significant household cooking responsibilities to ask: "How does cooking influence participants' sense of what kind of men they are?" and "What are the implications for gender relations?" I engage with theoretical debates about the nature of hegemonic and nonhegemonic masculinities. I find that, while many participants drew on what they saw as alternative masculinities to frame their cooking, these masculinities may in fact have hegemonic elements revolving around notions of individuality and romantic or sexual allure.

Introduction

Despite ubiquitous images of men's cooking in popular culture, women still do the majority of home cooking in North America and Australia (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2009; Statistics Canada, 2006; US Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2011). In her foundational book, *Feeding the Family*, sociologist Marjorie DeVault argues that the everyday activities of domestic cooking and eating are "rituals of dominance and deference" which produce notions of women — those who cater to and serve, and notions of men — those who are catered to and served (1991, p.161). More recent research suggests that, while people often profess gender-neutral attitudes about home cooking, the practice continues to be framed as "women's work" (Beagan, Chapman, D'Sylva, & Bassett, 2008; Lupton, 2000). On the other hand, younger men are cooking more at home than older men, and men in general are cooking more than in the past (Lupton, 2000; Statistics Canada, 1998, 2006; Wallop, 2009). These complexities raise questions about how home cooking fits with modern masculinities. While there has been significant scholarly attention to gender discourses around *women's* cooking and that of male *professional* chefs, little attention has been paid to masculinity and male home cooking. In addition, the research that does exist on the domestic realm typically focuses on men who cook infrequently. How do the foodwork activities of men who cook *often* influence their masculinities? What might this mean for the gendered division of foodwork? The research presented here is an attempt to address this empirical gap. I draw on interviews, meal diaries and cooking observations with thirty male home cooks of various ethno-racial backgrounds living in Toronto, Canada with significant home cooking responsibilities.

My goal is also to contribute to theoretical understandings of masculinity and gender inequality. The notion of hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 1995; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005) has been extremely influential to the study of masculinity, and

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its exact conceptualization is the subject of much debate (Beasley, 2008; Howson, 2008; Messerschmidt, 2008, 2012). In a recent article, Messerschmidt (2012) suggests that "to conceptualize fully hegemonic masculinities…scholars must unravel…nonhegemonic masculinities from hegemonic masculinities" (73). Engaging with critical qualifications of the term "hegemonic masculinity" (Wetherell & Edley, 1999), I hope to show that Messerschmidt's proposal may prove a challenge in some cases. This is because, as I argue below, some behaviours may draw on both hegemonic and nonhegemonic masculinities at the same time.

Masculinities & cooking in the literature

Lining up with the public/male, private/female divide, research on men's experiences in the kitchen has tended to focus on professional chefs — especially as they are portrayed on food TV (e.g. De Solier, 2005; Hollows, 2003; Parasecoli, 2005, 2008; Swenson, 2009). Researchers have also attended to all-male non-domestic environments (e.g. fire stations, Boy Scout troupes) (Deutsch, 2005; Mechling, 2005) and to the division of foodwork in households (Beagan et al., 2008; Bove & Sobal, 2006; Carrington, 1999; Kemmer, 1999; Lupton, 2000; Murcott, 1983). Empirical work on the lived experience of home cooking for men is not only uncommon but limited in scope. A few years ago, Kemmer (2000) and Julier and Lindenfeld (2005) pointed out that empirical research on the topic tended to focus on heterosexual men in co-habiting relationships, especially men from privileged groups. Notwithstanding a few exceptions, where cooking is touched on in broader investigations of men's eating or domestic work (Aarseth, 2009; Carrington, 1999; Julier, 2002; Sellaeg & Chapman, 2008), this is still the case. In addition, few studies focus on men who have significant cooking responsibilities in their homes, a characteristic which can have a notable influence on masculinities (Szabo, 2013a).

The few studies that do exist on men's cooking tell us a few things about masculinity and foodwork. Some studies show that men may compensate for their involvement in the traditionally feminine domestic kitchen. They may emphasize their masculinity by playing up their careers (Carrington, 1999), or by doing "masculine" things in the kitchen such as swearing (Deutsch, 2005). They may also draw on what I describe elsewhere (Szabo, 2013a) as "traditional culinary masculinities" to describe their cooking. To be specific, they may frame their cooking as leisurely entertainment, culinary artistry, or performance, thereby distancing it from "feminine" cooking: mundane care work done for loved ones (Cairns, Johnston, & Baumann, 2010; De Solier, 2005; Parasecoli, 2005, 2008; Swenson, 2009). Other studies have found that some men create intimacy with loved ones through cooking (Aarseth & Olsen, 2008; Szabo, 2013a; Bove & Sobal, 2006; Carrington, 1999; Owen, Metcalfe, Dryden, & Shipton, 2010) or frame day-to-day cooking as a "joint family project" rather than a "feminine" responsibility (Aarseth & Olsen, 2008). In general, this research focuses on men's and women's *approaches* to cooking. The question has been, to what extent do men and women cook in traditionally "masculine" and "feminine" ways? There has been less attention to how cooking as a life practice influences masculinities more generally. In other words, how might significant involvement in home cooking – a traditionally feminine practice – influence men's sense of *what kind of man* they are? The current study attempts to address this gap.

Masculinities & food: theoretical overview

The notion of hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 1995) is one of the most influential concepts in masculinity studies (Beasley, 2008). It is premised on the idea that there is a hierarchy of masculinities in any particular "society-wide" context and that one of these – the hegemonic form – is "more socially central, or more associated with authority and social power, than others" (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005, p.846). Further, hegemonic masculinity "structures and legitimates hierarchical gender relations between men and women, between masculinity and femininity, and among men" (Messerschmidt, 2012, p.58). In this framework, there are multiple masculinities modelled and enacted by men in different social contexts. While the hegemonic form is the "pinnacle of a pyramid of masculinities" (Beasley, 2008), nonhegemonic masculinities may be tolerated or even celebrated in particular contexts (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005, p.846, 848).

Food scholar Jeffrey Sobal (2005) combines the concept of multiple masculinities with the notion of "cultural scripts" to understand men's food behaviours. For him, men draw on different scripts ("strong man", "healthy man") to suit different interactional situations around food (meat eating, meat avoiding) (2005, p.146, 148). Yet men (and women) do not choose different scripts with equal comfort (Meuser, 2003, p.143). Masculinities are deeply felt and inscribed in bodily routines and emotions (Connell, 1995; Meuser, 2003) and intersect with other elements of subjectivity such as ethnocultural background, class and sexuality (Messner, 1997).

Another important point related to food behaviours, especially cooking, is that one of the main axes of gender hierarchy has been production/reproduction, where the public/male realm of employment is celebrated over the private/female domestic realm (Connell, 1995). As Howson (2008) argues, one of the three "hegemonic principles" upon which hegemonic masculinity is predicated is breadwinning. When men choose to undertake domestic work such as cooking, this can pose threats to a breadwinning identity (Carrington, 1999; Hochschild, 1989). However, context is important. Men may receive praise for involvement in domestic work from those with egalitarian attitudes, particularly women (Coltrane, 1989; Deutsch & Saxon, 1998; Hochschild, 1989). This is especially the case, as Hochschild (1989) notes, if the "going rate" for men's domestic work is high. In her landmark study of housework in straight households, she found: "If a man was really 'rare' [in engaging in domestic work], his wife intuitively felt grateful, or at least both of them felt she ought to" (p.54). This has implications for the gender division of labour. If men's domestic work is seen as a "gift" and women's simply expected, then the "economy of gratitude" in a couple (or in an extended family) becomes unbalanced (Hochschild, 1989). A man's domestic contributions may be judged "appropriate" or even "fair", even if they are not equal (Coltrane, 1989). This relates back to the concept of hegemonic masculinity. All men benefit from male domination, or collect a "patriarchal dividend", even if they do not themselves practice the most extreme form of masculinity (Connell, 1995). Moreover, hegemonic masculinity is truly *hegemonic* in that those who are oppressed by it, such as