



Research report

A qualitative, cross cultural examination of attitudes and behaviour in relation to cooking habits in France and Britain



Andy Gatley^{a,*}, Martin Caraher^b, Tim Lang^b

^a London School of Hospitality & Tourism, University of West London, St. Mary's Road, London W5 5RF, United Kingdom

^b Centre for Food Policy, School of Arts and Social Sciences, City University London, Northampton Square, London EC1V 0HB, United Kingdom

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ABSTRACT

Food campaigners, policy makers, journalists and academics continue to debate an alleged decline in home cooking, a corresponding increase in individualised eating habits and the impact of such trends upon public health. The focus of this research was to examine and compare current domestic food practices in Britain with those of another country, namely France. In-depth interviews with 27 members of the public drawn from both countries enabled the researchers to explore people's actual cooking practices in the home. Analysis of the data revealed that respondents from both countries often lacked time to cook and increasingly relied on a mix of both raw and convenience-type foods to varying degrees. A range of cooking skills was employed in the home, although confidence in relation to cooking was more varied with the French respondents who demonstrated a greater willingness to 'cook from scratch'. There was some evidence of men on both sides of The Channel engaging with cooking in the home although this often formed part of a leisure activity undertaken at weekends and for special occasions.

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Introduction

Although resistant to change, domestic food practices and eating habits have always evolved alongside broader cultural changes and are linked to key social determinants and powerful economic structures in an environment in which food is both produced and consumed (see [Cabinet Office Report, 2008](#); [Mennell, 1996](#); [Mintel, 2003](#); [Nestle Family Monitor \(NFM\), 2001](#); [Warde, 1997](#)). However, since the Second World War, the pace and rhythm of change appears to have quickened and [Lang and Caraher \(2001\)](#) considered that in Britain, knowledge of cooking skills and their application in the home are now in a period of fundamental transition. The potential significance of any such trend is that while no causal link has been established between cooking at home and obesity, it has been suggested that if people lack the ability or confidence to cook, their food choices are bound to be more limited ([Chen, Lee, Chang, & Wahlqvist, 2012](#); [Rees, Hinds, Dickson, O'Mara-Eves, & Thomas, 2012](#)). It has also been argued that the ability and willingness of someone to cook is one of the factors that can enable people to make informed decisions about their food choices, their diet and their capacity to follow advice on healthy eating ([Caraher, Lang, Dixon, & Carr-Hill, 1999](#); [HEA, 1998](#); [Lang & Caraher, 2001](#)). Any decline in cooking skills can result in people becoming more reliant on convenience foods and while many are nutritionally well balanced, others are more highly processed and frequently high in

fat, sugar and salt ([Stitt, Jepson, Paulson-Box, & Prisk, 1996](#)) and thus require people to understand food labelling if they wish to control their diet (Caraher et al.). In light of the recent European 'horse meat scandal' and fraudulent food labelling, [Blythman \(2013\)](#) considers that if we want to eat safe, wholesome food then we must select unprocessed foods and cook them ourselves. Meanwhile, on the other side of the Atlantic, [Pollan \(2013, 1\)](#) suggests that cooking not only gives people greater autonomy over the foods they eat but that it is also

"the most important thing an ordinary person can do to help reform the American food system, make it healthier and more sustainable."

'Cooking' has been described as the application of heat to food ([McGee, 1984](#)) while [Levi-Strauss \(1965\)](#) theorised how a range of culturally acceptable procedures are used to transform nature (raw) to culture (cooked) or indeed how raw food becomes cooked through a process of cultural transformation ([Beardsworth & Keil, 1997](#); [Pollan, 2007](#)). [Fieldhouse \(1986, 63\)](#) adds that the actual cooking process or method of cultural transformation selected depends on the "types of food available, the state of material culture and the cultural needs and preferences of the society". Similarly, the term 'cuisine' is often used to describe methods of food preparation traditional to a specific population or region and is influenced not only by the types of food available locally, but also by such factors as economic conditions, trade patterns, culture and customs. [Caraher and Lang \(1999\)](#) highlight how attitudes and behaviour in relation to cooking need to be studied within a wider

* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: andy.gatley@uwl.ac.uk (A. Gatley).

social and cultural context and for example [Mennell, Murcott, and Van Oterloo \(1992, 20\)](#) employed the term 'culinary culture' as "a shorthand term for the ensemble of attitudes and taste people bring to cooking and eating" while [Short \(2006\)](#) and [Lang, Barling, and Caraher \(2009\)](#) describe 'culinary culture' as the knowledge and experience of how to plan and create a meal.

Who cooks what, why and how is a central focus of this research. Previous studies have demonstrated how cooking was seen as a woman's duty, refuelling the active breadwinner and how such labour demonstrated her nurturing responsibilities for the family with the "proper" meal symbolising a woman's role as homemaker ([Beardsworth & Keil, 1997](#); [Brannen, Dodd, Oakley, & Storey, 1994](#); [Charles, 1995](#); [Charles & Kerr, 1984, 1990](#); [DeVault, 1991](#); [Dixey, 1996](#); [Fieldhouse, 1986](#); [HEA, 1998](#); [Mennell et al., 1992](#); [Murcott, 1982, 1995b](#); [Warde, 1997](#)). [Murcott \(1982, 1983a, 1983b\)](#) examined the constituents and prescribed cooking techniques associated with the socially important 'cooked' or 'proper' meal in Britain and found there to be strict rules that must be adhered to in relation to what makes a 'cooked' dinner 'proper' (see also [Charles & Kerr, 1990](#)). Such a meal must consist of meat, potatoes and a boiled green vegetable served on a single plate. [Douglas \(1997\)](#) found that a 'proper meal' typically also demands the eating with others such as family members around a table along with certain rules regarding social interaction. She noted highly definable and sequenced meal structures throughout the day and while less significant meals and snacks could be unstructured, the Sunday meal, for example, had to be larger and demanded more varied cooking methods along with the addition of gravy so as to mark the day as special (see [Charles & Kerr, 1984](#); [Douglas & Nicod, 1974](#); [Murcott, 1995a](#)).

However, evidence suggests that in the twenty first century, meals are becoming restructured, simpler, made with an increasing range of convenience foods, demonstrate greater male involvement and are more likely to be eaten alone – although considerable variation remains and it is premature to report the 'death of the family meal' ([Bove & Sobal, 2006](#); [HEA, 1998](#); [Hunt, Fazio, MacKenzie, & Moloney, 2011](#); [Key Note, 2007](#); [Mintel, 2003](#); [NFM, 2001](#); [Warde, Southerton, Olsen, & Cheng, 2005a](#)). The globalisation thesis points to how powerful structural factors within the food system now operate at a global level and are having a more universal impact on the relationship the individual in many parts of the world, now has to food ([Andrieu, Darmon & Drewnowski, 2006](#); [Mennell, 1996](#); [Millstone & Lang, 2008](#); [Pollan, 2007](#); [Popkin, 2001](#); [Ritzer, 2000](#); [Schmidhuber & Traill, 2006](#); [Warde, Cheng, Olsen, & Southerton, 2007](#)). Large multinational food corporations have emerged which target consumers around the world that often appear to share increasingly similar habits and tastes as a result of cultural homogenisation ([Giddens, 1991](#); [Hall, Held, & McGrew, 1992](#); [Needle, 2004](#); [Robins, 1991](#); [Wallerstein, 1979](#); [Waters, 1995](#)). Changing working and family structures, hectic and increasingly urban lifestyles, time scarcity, rising affluence and competing demands on leisure time as well as demographic and technical changes have all contributed towards the development of increasingly concentrated agri-food businesses eager to satisfy demand for pre-prepared foods, fast food, takeaways and other products from the food service sector ([Atkins & Bowler, 2001](#); [Key Note, 2007](#); [Lang et al., 2009](#); [Pollan, 2007](#); [Tansey & Worsley, 1995](#); [Warde, 1997, 1999](#)). Such availability of convenience foods, defined as commercially processed foods designed to save time and effort, have influenced meal preparation and consumption patterns in many parts of the world ([Bruner, van der Horst, & Siegrist, 2010](#); [Warde et al., 2007](#)). With the widespread increase in women in paid employment, access to convenience foods and other meal solutions, women are reported to be spending less time cooking than twenty-five years ago and men slightly more (see [FSA, 2007](#); [Key Note, 2007](#); [Lake et al.,](#)

[2006](#); [Lang & Caraher, 2001](#); [NFM, 2001](#); [Pettinger, Holdsworth, & Gerber, 2004, 2006](#); [Tansey & Worsley, 1995](#); [Warde, Cheng, Olsen, & Southerton, 2007](#); [Warde, Southerton, Olsen, & Cheng, 2005a, 2005b](#)).

While evidence of the globalisation of consumption might point to convergence of practices around food and cooking, divergence remains apparent both within and between countries. Despite globalising trends, many countries endeavour to preserve their distinctive culinary cultures and socio-demographic conditions and individual household arrangements continue to influence attitudes and behaviour in relation to domestic cooking practices. Whilst the time spent cooking may be declining in many homes, interest in food and cooking in Britain, at least among certain social groups, appears to be rising as can be noted from the admiration for celebrity chef shows and their bestselling books. Some individuals are able to indulge in cooking as a creative art form, follow elaborate recipes and as such reflect their cultural capital, elitist good taste and personal identities to those outside. The growth in farmers markets in many British towns, the quest among some for more sustainable diets, the search by others for ever healthier regimens and life enhancing foods suggest that counter cultural tendencies are clearly also present in Britain.

Aims of the study

While theory has suggested the significance of the 'cooked' or 'proper' meal to the family, recent research points to its declining importance. Furthermore, given our theoretical understanding of how cooking behaviours are shaped by interaction with a range of structural as well as socio-cultural factors, it was important not only to explore the influence of such factors, but to examine how food items are currently being transformed into culturally acceptable meals as well as the skills employed to achieve such an outcome. Such an exploratory study required access to the routine, lived experiences of people's everyday cooking practices within the home and in order to develop detailed understanding of such activities, qualitative interviews were selected as an appropriate means by which to gather the necessary data (see [Mason, 1996](#); [Sellaeg & Chapman, 2008](#)). Additionally, [Warde et al. \(2007\)](#) remind us that comparative research is a useful means by which to examine patterns of food behaviour and that analysis of commonality and differentiation across national borders can help expose the complex way in which routine behaviours around food may be shaped by a myriad of factors. Although meaningful, writers such as [Warde et al.](#) consider such an approach is rare and while there has been some insightful comparative research which the authors of this paper have found particularly relevant (see [Brown & Dury, 2009](#); [Pettinger, 2000](#); [Pettinger et al., 2004, 2006, 2008](#); [Rozin, Fischler, Imada, Sarubin, & Wrzesniewski, 1999](#); [Rozin, Kabnick, Pete, Fischler, & Shields, 2003](#); [Rozin, Fischler, Shields, & Masson, 2006](#)), rarely has a qualitative methodology been adopted. As such it was felt that cross-cultural qualitative research would provide a particularly useful lens with which to more deeply observe similarities and differences across socio-cultural settings and offer a means by which to extend our knowledge of the complexities of such phenomena. It was decided to examine how people currently cook in Britain, their response to globalising tendencies within the food system, society and culture more generally as well as how contemporary living and working arrangements influence their attitudes and behaviour in relation to domestic cooking practices. The aim was to compare such data with data collected from a comparable country so as to gain insight into whether such globalising trends and changing social arrangements are having a similar impact and whether there is evidence of increasing homogenisation of food and cooking habits across national borders or whether distinctions largely remain both with-

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