



Research report

More than preparing a meal? Concerning the meanings of home cooking

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ABSTRACT

Cooking is one of the basic activities in our lives. However, people frequently feel they fall short of time to cook when facing problems with the temporal organization of daily life. How people think about home cooking is considered to be important for the time they spend on preparing meals. It is assumed that the meaning of cooking differs for different people, depending on the temporal and social context. This contribution allows us to clarify how the meaning of cooking varies according to individual and household characteristics and the cooking occasion. By using the pooled time-diary data from the Flemish time-use surveys from 1999 and 2004 we can examine people's views on cooking in order to understand how people use time for food preparation. Although the results suggest that people consider cooking primarily as a household chore, preparing food can also be a way to please others, as well as themselves. It seems that feelings of time pressure and the family situation are clearly related to men's and women's cooking experiences. Furthermore, the meaning of cooking also tends to be clearly influenced by the meal situation and (the moment of) the day.

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Introduction

If we are to examine the meanings of domestic cooking, we need to frame it in the broader context of how time influences people's daily lives. Perhaps much more than in the past, people today are very much aware of the use of time. As a result they want to allocate time as rationally as possible hence decisions must be made daily about time usage (Elchardus, 1990). Home cooking seems to offer a particular case, since it has become one of the apparent paradoxes related to modern Western food habits; on the one hand, it is more and more experienced as frustrating or time-consuming, whilst on the other hand, books and television programs on cooking have significantly increased in popularity (Kemmer, Anderson, & Marshall, 1998; Saulsbury, 2005). When questioning the motivations behind cooking, we can assume that people not only prepare meals to meet their nutritional requirements. Cooking can also be a way to relax or to please, if not impress, friends and family who come over for dinner. The meanings people ascribe to cooking reveal their motives, which, in relation to the definition of the situation and their desires, may bring to notice their knowledge or awareness about the prevailing and appropriate discourses concerning the nature of food preparation (Elchardus & Glorieux, 1993).

The principle aim of this article is to analyze how domestic cooking practices take different meanings for different people, depending on the cooking occasion (the social context) and the moment of the time for cooking (the temporal context). With this contribution we attempt to address today's pressing problems about the use of cooking time, which touches upon broad social issues such as the disappearance of the family meal or problems of overweight. After a brief literature overview concerning the reasons for cooking in particular, and a summary of the data and methods, we test our hypotheses derived from the review of the literature, as well as an explanation for the contributing part of the meanings of time in understanding people's cooking habits.

The meaning of cooking

Despite the changed cultural discourse on domestic cooking as a primarily female task (Szabo, 2011) and the slightly increased interest and participation of men in home cooking over the few last decades (Bove & Sobal, 2006; Cairns, Johnston, & Baumann, 2010; Glorieux, Minnen, & Vandeweyer, 2005; Kjaernes, 2001), cooking remains to be highly gendered (Baxter, 2000; Glorieux et al., 2006; Hamrick, Andrews, Guthrie, Hopkins, & McClelland, 2011; Kaufmann, 2010; Kemmer et al., 1998; Kjaernes, 2001; Mancino & Newman, 2006; Miles, 2005; Murcott, 2000) and closely associated with feminine characteristics (i.e., feelings of moral obligation or care giving responsibilities). Nowadays, home cooking is still primarily related to the 'traditional' cultural expectation that women as homemakers need to prepare meals for their relatives

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in order to properly fulfill their wife/mother role (Beagan, Chapman, D'Sylva, & Bassett, 2008; Devault, 1994; Mancino & Newman, 2006), which, according to Kaufmann (2010), Kjaernes (2001), Sidenvall, Nydahl, and Fjellström (2000), would be more prevalent among the older age groups. Warde (1997) illustrates this clearly by stressing that women, who do not cook for their family, feel guilty for not fulfilling their traditional cultural duty of care, and as a result fear negative reactions of their social environment. Despite the popular myth of 'the new man', men tend to be more often occasionally engaged in domestic cooking and less bound by the obligations and duties concerning the daily preparation of meals (Aarseth & Olsen, 2008; Cairns et al., 2010; Fürst, 1997; Hamrick et al., 2011). Studies on people's experiences on the domestic division of labour, related to food preparation, highlight that men experience cooking in a different way than women since they are more likely to distance themselves from the feminine identity, which is still closely linked to cooking. Instead they rather experience cooking as a necessity or a hobby which they undertake for relaxation or pleasure (Aarseth & Olsen, 2008; Cairns et al., 2010; Devault, 1994; Fürst, 1997). According to Koelet (2005) men are more likely to participate in home cooking since cooking gives them more pleasure compared to other "female household tasks", like cleaning or washing clothes. However, gender is not the only issue that shapes people's perception or view on the nature of food preparation. The way people give meaning to their time reserved for cooking can also be influenced by a great number of other individual, familial or contextual factors, which may affect the definition of the situation (Elchardus & Glorieux, 1993).

Cohabitation seems to structure the cooking practices due to the social importance couples attach to the sharing of homemade meals as a symbol of their family life (Kemmer et al., 1998; Kjaernes, 2001; Mestdag, 2007; Murcott, 2000; Sobal, Bove, & Rauschenbach, 2002). People who live alone rather approach cooking as a necessity (Sidenvall et al., 2000), and therefore mostly do not cook for themselves (Murcott, 2000), since it is not worth the time and effort (Sidenvall et al., 2000), which reveals the gift-relationship of preparing meals (Kjaernes, 2001). Therefore, cooking would be, particularly for women (Beagan et al., 2008; Cairns et al., 2010), only worthwhile when family or friends join them in eating, which clearly shows that people still tend to acknowledge the social character of eating (Mestdag, 2007). Nonetheless, the presence of meal partners can also be influenced by the extent to which people face difficulties in trying to manage both work and family responsibilities. This can result in time constraints, which in turn can affect people's motives to cook. Warde (1999) ascribes this to the de-routinization of everyday life, implying that people experience more time pressure when trying to fit cooking and eating into their own time schedules and those from others, which makes daily life more hurried and cooking less pleasurable (Horst et al., 2011). According to Vandeweyer (2010) and Glorieux and Koelet (2002) this is particularly true for women since they are more likely than men to spend their spare time completing household tasks, whereas men rather spend their free time by doing leisure activities. Women, especially when unemployed, throw themselves in their household chores in order to avoid negative feelings of guilt or complaints. Elchardus and Glorieux (1995) explain this by stating that employment generates feelings of usefulness and social connectedness for workers by fulfilling their duties and responsibilities towards society. The amount of time people have at their disposal also depends on (the moment) of the day, which, according to Kaufmann (2010), exhibit differences in the social importance of cooking. Where we would often cook quick and easy meals on weekdays, we would spend more time on cooking during weekends, especially on Sundays, since meals are considered to be more socially important during weekends (Kaufmann, 2010; Mestdag, 2007).

The principle aim of this paper is to offer insight into the meaning of home cooking and to clarify whether there are significant differences according to the impact of individual and familial resources and the social contexts of food preparation on people's views on cooking. Although many researchers, such as Short (2003), have pointed out that experiences of cooking are problematic to quantify, and that qualitative research is better at investigating people's feelings about their domestic cooking practices, we chose to investigate the meanings of cooking quantitatively in order to explain people's use of time for home cooking and to allow generalizations about the nature of domestic cooking in Flanders.¹ By investigating people's domestic cooking experiences via a contextual approach, the findings of this article also offer a detailed and accurate picture of the social and temporal embedding of household cooking in people's daily lives, which cannot be examined when using a qualitative research design.

Methods

The data for this investigation are supplied by the Flemish time-use surveys that were conducted by the research group TOR of the Vrije Universiteit Brussel in 1999 (TOR99, questioning 1,474 respondents) and 2004 (TOR04, questioning 1,780 respondents). In these surveys, respondents were asked to register all their activities during an entire week. Particularly for every registered activity, the respondents were requested to indicate the reasons for their actions, the starting and the ending time, the location, the mode of transport and the social context in which their actions were performed. The respondents were also asked to complete a questionnaire to assess aspects such as socio-demographic characteristics, time pressure, meal preparation or gender role views. Time-use surveys are thus helpful to get very profound information about people's daily actions and allow to picture how activities, such as cooking, are embedded in the structures of social time.

Over the past few decades, cooking and eating practices have been widely researched based on time-use surveys (f.e., Cheng, Olsen, Southerton, & Warde, 2007; Hamrick et al., 2011; Mancino & Newman, 2006; Mestdag, 2007). However, doing research into the meanings of cooking with the use of time-use surveys is a rather unique or uncommon research feature within the field of food studies. In time-use surveys, activities are usually lexically distinguished, based on their description in dictionaries (Elchardus & Glorieux, 1987). However, the TOR99 and the TOR04 data allow us to research how people experience time and to explore how the lexical definition of cooking is different from the subjective meanings actors attach to food preparation. Every time respondents entered cooking in their diary, they were asked to define the cooking episode based on four proposed motivations: obligation (because I have/had to), sense of duty (to please others, out of a sense of duty), necessity (because it is necessary in order to be able to do something else, in this case, eating) and pleasure (because of the pleasure or the enjoyment the activity provides). The difference in meaning between obligation and duty is that the former is driven by external forces and extremely sanctioned, which means that the actor fears negative reactions from his or her social environment, whilst the latter stems from internal motivations in the light of generalized values (f.e., in order to be a 'good' parent or partner you feel internal pressure to cook for your family). Although one answer for each activity was desirable, respondents were allowed to indicate multiple answers. Only 9% of the respondents experienced cooking as ambiguous.

¹ Flanders is the Dutch speaking part of Belgium, has over 6 million inhabitants, counting for 60% of the total Belgian population.

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