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Familial fictions: families and food, convenience and care

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Abstract

Purpose: The paper explores the way diverse family forms are depicted in recent TV advertisements and how the ads may be read as an indication of contemporary attitudes to food. It focuses particularly on consumers' ambivalent attitude towards convenience foods, given the way these foods are moralized within a highly gendered discourse of 'feeding the family'.

Design/methodology/approach: The paper presents a critical reading of the advertisements and their complex meanings for diverse audiences, real and imagined. The latter part of the paper draws on the results of ethnographically-informed fieldwork in the north of England.

Findings: The research highlights the value of food as a 'lens' on contemporary family life. It challenges the conventional distinction between convenience and care, arguing that convenience food can be used as an expression of care.

Research limitations: The paper makes limited inferences about audiencing processes in the absence of direct empirical evidence.

Practical implications: The research has implications for providers of 'healthy eating' advice, attending to the way that individual food choices are embedded within the practices of everyday life.

Originality/value: The paper's value lies in its original interpretation of TV food advertising within the context of contemporary family life and in the novel connections that are drawn between convenience and care.

Keywords: food advertising, family dynamics, convenience food, care and caring

Paper type: Research

Introduction

In June 2016, the Swedish home furnishings company IKEA launched the latest in its series of advertisements, *The Wonderful Everyday*. Called 'Cooks', the advert featured a grand-father and grand-daughter making a meal together when the grand-mother and her daughter go out for the day leaving the grand-father in charge. After a nervous start, struggling to find the right ingredients and appropriate cooking utensils, they begin to have fun, messing around in the kitchen and cooking lunch together (see Figure 1).¹ Even when the grandfather looks in the fridge and discovers that some food has already been prepared for them, they carry on with their meal and are still enjoying themselves when the mother and grand-mother return home. A voice-over (in heavy Swedish accent) delivers the final line: 'when we cook together, we make more than just food'.



Figure 1: 'Cooks', directed by Jean-Pierre Jeunet for IKEA (permission requested)

It is a touching parable of modern family life, playing on the ambivalence of inter-generational relations, light-heartedly challenging conventional gender stereotypes and making witty reference to current concerns about domestic cooking skills. The film was shot by Jean-Pierre Jeunet, director of the whimsical 2001 film *Amélie*, and was part of IKEA's 'distinctive, emotionally resonant and brilliantly strategic' cooperation with the advertising agency Mother London (Campaign, 15 December 2016). Discussing the campaign, Laurent Tiersen, IKEA's British and Irish marketing manager said: 'Food is

¹ The full ad can be viewed at: <https://youtu.be/vmtWcwvtXE> (last accessed 16 November 2017).

ever more prevalent in today's culture – we're obsessed with taking pictures of food, watching cooking shows about food and even reading about food. And yet, research indicates that there is a large amount of people who cook and eat most meals alone. We see food and cooking as an activity to bring people together and take ourselves less seriously to bring a bit of joy to our everyday lives' (quoted in *The Drum*, 7 July 2017). The company later won an award for Creative Marketer of the Year (2016) and IKEA's relationship with Mother London was described as the UK's most creative advertising partnership (*Campaign*, 23 June 2016).

But what does this simple exposition of the joys of cooking reveal about contemporary family life and the pleasures and anxieties associated with 'feeding the family'? Arguably, the ad addresses long-standing fears about the decline of cooking skills, boldly asserted in TV series such as *Jamie's Ministry of Food* but actually based on rather thin evidence.² It provides a humorous commentary on men's changing domestic roles and the contested spaces of the contemporary kitchen (see Meah & Jackson 2013) and an alternative to the conventional view that cooking is a serious business, requiring discipline and skills that many find intimidating.

Nor is this an isolated example. Family dynamics are a key component of many contemporary advertising campaigns. In an earlier IKEA ad, for example, a young French boy is shown fooling his estranged parents into providing him with lavish meals (*Campaign*, 5 February 2016). The 'cooking is caring' ad begins with the father and son shadow-boxing as they walk along the street together. When they reach the father's home, he asks how his son has enjoyed the previous week at his mother's house. He replies that his mother has cooked him macaroni every night. With an appalled look, the father then sets to work in the kitchen, chopping fresh ingredients and making an elaborate supper which is greeted appreciatively by his son ('Mmmm'). The film then switches to the mother's house where the young boy employs the same tactic ('Every

² *Jamie's Ministry of Food* was first broadcast in 2006. Shot in Rotherham, South Yorkshire, the series aimed to 'teach a town to cook', following a recent public scandal about the quality of school meals where local mothers were dubbed 'sinner ladies' for their alleged failure to follow official guidance on 'healthy eating -- see Fox and Smith (2010), Slocum et al. (2011) and Piper (2013) among many other commentaries. The alleged decline of domestic cooking skills is debated by Murcott (1997), Short (2006), Meah and Watson (2011) and others.

evening? Just macaroni?') which leads to more elaborate cooking and a self-satisfied smirk from the boy.³

In this and similar ads, the target audience goes well beyond divorced and separated parents, their specific circumstances providing a vehicle for wider arguments about the role of cooking and caring in modern family lives. Another telling example is the 2015 advertisement for a Colman's meal-kit in which a young girl is being introduced to her father's new partner. Responding to the emotionally-charged atmosphere, the woman provides a simple meal, with the reassuring line: "This risotto says, "Don't worry, I'm not trying to be your mum!". In this case, the argument runs that convenience foods are an acceptable alternative to traditional home-cooking even if nothing can ever quite replace what an imagined mother used to cook.⁴

The same company has also reflected on the emotional demands of contemporary fatherhood. Its 2014 advertisement for Colman's shepherd's pie mix ('with real herbs and seasoning') shows a teenage girl having a row with her boyfriend. Her father is seen making supper for her as she returns home, with the voice-over suggesting that 'This shepherd's pie says... I know I'm just your dad and I'm useless at this sort of thing...' but that he can give good hugs and make a comforting supper. In this case, it seems, food helps emotionally-challenged and inarticulate men to be good dads.⁵

Other companies have been using similar tactics where the diversity of contemporary family life is a key part of the marketing message. The supermarket food retailer, Sainsbury's, recently launched a new campaign (#fooddancing) which emphasized the pleasures of home cooking. Described as 'energetic and joyful', the ads include a montage of film clips, uploaded from participants' mobile phones, showing ordinary people dancing around their kitchens, including Black and Minority Ethnic families and disabled people (Campaign, 18 January 2017). The campaign followed a change of

³ The 'cooking is caring' ad can be viewed here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=veLstsQKm4Q> (last accessed 16 November 2017).

⁴ The ad can no longer be viewed online but a commentary is available here: <http://www.foodbev.com/news/colmans-launches-1m-marketing-campaign-for-its-meal-kit-range/> (last accessed 16 November 2017).

⁵ The shepherd's pie ad can be viewed here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wWLN7K4lBwE> (last accessed 16 November 2017).

advertising agency (from Abbott Mead Vickers BBDO, with whom Sainsbury's had worked for 35 years, to Wieden & Kennedy). Its message is clear – that cooking should be fun and can be enjoyed by everyone.⁶

In another recent ad ('We are Family') which aired in August 2017, the frozen food company McCain's asks: 'What's normal when it comes to family?'⁷ Reflecting on the diversity of modern families, the ad includes an ethnically diverse cast of stay-at-home mums, working mums, adopted mums, grand-parents, long-distant dads, gay dads, 'your brother from another mother' and 'your sister from another mister who pops round for tea'. The voice over is by Ricky Tomlinson, the lovably dysfunctional father from the 1990s sit-com *The Royle Family*, who delivers the punchline that 'It's meal times that make a family'. The ad prompted comparison with the iconic 'Oxo family' who featured in a series of adverts for instant gravy that ran throughout the 1960s and '70s and then again for sixteen years from 1983. Despite the resurrection of the ad in 2001, media observers declared that the Oxo family no longer reflected modern family life (Campaign, 2017).

So what do all these ads tell us about the complex relationship between families and food? What social changes do they index and how should they be understood as 'familial fictions' that resonate to varying degrees with different audiences?

The following sections reflect on the findings of ethnographic research, carried out in the north of England on various research projects. Before turning to that discussion, some methodological detail is necessary. The selection of advertisements in the previous section was purposive, not based on formal sampling criteria and with no claims to representativeness. The analysis involved a close reading of the ads, paying attention to text and image, soundtrack and voice-over. Contextual information was also sought from the marketing press regarding the advertising agency and any inferences that could be drawn about the brief. A more systematic analysis would

⁶ The #fooddancing ads can be viewed here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H4bDzg9Wo_0 (last accessed 16 November 2017).

⁷ The ad can be viewed here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aI9fjN1az9g> (last accessed 16 November 2017).

involve liaising directly with the advertising agency and probing audience reactions empirically, as we have done in previous research (e.g. Jackson 1994; Jackson, Watson & Piper 2013). The latter parts of this paper draw on the findings of ethnographically-informed research, involving interviews, shopping 'go-alongs', kitchen visits, cooking observations and a variety of visual methods including participant-directed photography and video. The fieldwork was conducted by Angela Meah and includes data on a wide range of participants in terms of age and class, education and occupation, gender and ethnicity, family circumstances and household composition. Angela also participated fully in the analysis of the data and we have co-authored several papers together.

Food and families

It is often claimed that food is a powerful 'lens' on family life, where family roles and relations are performed and family dynamics are defined and displayed (Jackson 2009; Finch 2007). Given the diversity of contemporary families – with increasing numbers of gay and lesbian couples, more single-person households (both young and old), and increasingly complex household arrangements following divorce and separation, it might reasonably be concluded that there is no such things as 'the family' (viewed as a single, timeless and homogeneous entity). 'The family' is, as Marjorie De Vault (1991: 15) acutely observed, a 'falsely monolithic' concept, challenged by the diversity of family life but still powerful in ideological and institutional terms. In these circumstances, researchers have begun to emphasise the diverse practices involved in 'doing families' (Morgan 1996) rather than focusing on archetypal family forms such as the so-called nuclear family. And yet the (nuclear) family remains a powerful normative social ideal, underpinned by strong institutional structures and legal force, capable of exerting considerable moral authority.

While gender roles may be changing, with men assuming more domestic responsibilities in some households, the work of 'feeding the family' is still frequently defined as women's work (De Vault 1991, Aarseth 2009). In this context, kitchens are a key site in the performance of family life, viewed simultaneously as a place of female empowerment and as a site of women's oppression. While the daily round of cooking may be burdensome for many women, especially when undertaken on a routine basis

for ungrateful family members, it is often portrayed in the media as a source of fulfilment and pleasure. Consider this extract from Nigella Lawson's cookbook, *How to be a Domestic Goddess*, where she writes about women's alienation from the domestic sphere and her ironic dream of replacing domestic drudgery with the 'familial warmth' of the kitchen. In place of the 'skin-of-the-teeth efficiency' that characterizes modern cooking, Nigella Lawson wants women to claim back the kitchen and to imagine themselves 'trailing nutmeggy fumes of baking pie in our languorous wake', 'wafting along in the warm, sweet-smelling air ... winning adoring glances and endless approbation from anyone who has the good fortune to eat in her kitchen' (2000: vii). This is, of course, a fantasy, offering her readers reassurance and entertainment. But it speaks volumes about the ambiguities and anxieties of modern family life.⁸ The domestic dramas portrayed by IKEA and Sainsbury emphasise the fun and frivolity of cooking in a context of growing concerns about the conduct of family life and the alleged decline of parenting and cooking skills (cf. the recent moral panic over the reported demise of Sunday lunch, a 'proper' meal, cooked with love from scratch).

The 'discourse of decline' and the heavily gendered associations of 'feeding the family' (De Vault 1991) both strongly shape the way our participants talked about food, both among themselves and with us as researchers. On many occasions, for example, when discussing their use of convenience food, participants felt the need to apologize for taking culinary short-cuts or using prepared or packaged ingredients which they acknowledged fell short of the ideal of cooking everything from scratch, using only fresh foods. They frequently engaged in self-deprecating humour or made ironic references to their culinary standards, referring to their freezer as 'the frozen veg patch' or describing a tin of ready-made chicken curry with the phrase 'Here's one I made earlier'. Paying attention to the use of humour and different occasions for laughter in relation to food has great potential as a source of information on contemporary family life (cf. Jackson & Meah, in review).

Convenience and care

Cooking from scratch using fresh ingredients is often counter-posed to the use of prepared ingredients and processed food, disparaged by reference to its 'convenience'.

⁸ For a critique, see Hollows (2003).

The contrast between home-made foods, cooked from scratch with love and care, and convenience foods, which are assumed to demonstrate a lack of care, is a key trope within contemporary culinary discourse. Indeed, British sociologist Alan Warde refers to convenience and care as one of four ‘culinary antinomies’ (structural oppositions) around which contemporary food consumption is currently organized, the others being novelty and tradition, health and indulgence, and economy and extravagance (Warde 1997). And yet it takes little reflection to realize that ‘convenience food’ is a complex and contested category, encompassing a wide variety of processed and semi-processed foods: bagged salads, frozen pizza, ready-meals, sausages, sandwiches and pies, confectionary and crisps – among many other products (cf. Jackson & Viehoff 2016). Despite this wide range of formats, ‘convenience food’ is commonly disparaged as unhealthy and unsustainable, its use ‘tinged with moral disapprobation’ (Warde 1999: 518). This is also part of the context for the IKEA cooks who strive to make a decent home-made meal, supplementing prepared ingredients with fresh tomatoes and red peppers.

In practice, of course, many households combine fresh and convenient foods without making a sharp distinction between the two categories (as when fresh ingredients are added to a shop-bought pasta sauce or ready-made pizza). So-called convenience foods, such as TV dinners in the US or supermarket ready-meals in the UK, increased in popularity from the 1950s, connected to increased female participation in the labour force and associated socio-technical changes (such as the development of supermarket shopping, domestic refrigeration and microwave cooking).

In a recent paper, Angela Meah and I have questioned the opposition between convenience and care, using empirical research to show how ordinary British households are able to express care through the use of convenience food (Meah & Jackson 2017). Our research with a diversity of households in Northern England mobilizes Fisher and Tronto’s (1990) typology of caring relations to show how convenience food can be used to demonstrate caring about, taking care of, caregiving and care-receiving. For example, our research participants spoke about using prepacked vegetables on environmental grounds to avoid food waste. They talked about having ready-meals and other prepared foods as back-up in order to cater for the

unexpected arrival of family members or other visitors. Some justified the use of take-away and other convenience foods as a way of enabling them to spend more 'quality time' with family members. Others spoke about the use of convenience foods such as ready-made pastry in order to combine cooking and childcare, or as a way of catering for 'fussy eaters' or under-weight children ('at least he's eating something').

Convenience food also enable fathers and grand-fathers with limited cooking skills to provide food, share intimacy and express care for their children or grand-children, as represented in the IKEA and Colman's ads discussed above (cf. Meah 2017).

Convenience foods were also seen as a way of introducing unfamiliar dishes and increasing the diversity of children's diets. Similarly, convenience foods allow parents to prepare meals that will be eaten without complaint from other family members even if without overt appreciation (cf. Charles & Kerr 1988; De Vault 1991; Burrige & Barker 2009).

While 'convenience' and 'care' may be irreconcilable as structural oppositions, our evidence suggests that they are routinely combined in practice. This is important in the context of current debates about families and food where a neoliberal logic of individual 'consumer choice' prevails and where, even in the privacy of the home, caring is subject to public scrutiny and normative expectations. While it is easy to blame consumers for their reliance on convenience food, citing its adverse health and environmental implications, our research demonstrates that different kinds of convenience food offer practical solutions to the complex and competing demands of contemporary family life. While the IKEA and Sainsbury ads offer idealised representations of the often vexed relationships between families and food, a blanket condemnation of convenience food does little to address the pressing issues that modern families currently face. Instead of criticising consumers for their poor dietary decisions, an ethnographic sensibility tries to understand the logic that informs consumer practices even where, from other perspectives, they culinary choices seem ill-informed or misguided.

With an eye to the context of consumption, it is also worth speculating on whether the ads would be read differently if viewed by audiences in other national contexts.⁹ For example, the contrast between convenience and care can also be applied in Sweden, where Helene Brembeck has demonstrated that the celebration of ‘cosy time’ at the end of the working week is conventionally spent at home, around the table or in front of the TV. Her work challenges this idealization of modern family life showing how ‘cosy time’ can also be spent at fast-food restaurants such as McDonald’s, avoiding the domestic labour involved in home-cooking while sharing valued time together (Brembeck 2005). More generally, the representation of ‘cosy Friday’ on a website promoting Swedish culture and traditions shows a distinctly ‘modern’ family, eating comfort food and watching TV while their kids tumble around on the sofa or sit on the floor (see Figure 2).



Figure 2: Cosy Friday (*fredagsmys*) in Sweden

Source: <https://sweden.se/culture-traditions/cosy-friday/>

(last accessed 17 November 2017)

The text accompanying this image reads:

⁹ David Sutton raised this question at a conference in Oslo when Angela Meah showed the ‘cooking as caring’ ad, arguing that the derogatory reference to macaroni and cheese in France would be an unrecognizable to an American audience, given the different framing of convenience food in the US.

In the 1990s, the term *fredagsmys*, or ‘cosy Friday’, established itself in the Swedish consciousness. The expression stems from a long tradition of making the start of the weekend a bit special... Terminology aside, it is a much-needed way to mark the end of the working week and gear up for the weekend. It is a culinary semicolon.

The explanation continues:

Fredagsmys takes on different shapes depending on who it is for: a couple, a family with kids and friends will all have their own variation. A key ingredient, however, is easy meals for which everyone is the master chef. Finger food and snacks are preferred to cooking and cleaning a pile of dirty pots and pans. On a Wednesday evening the kids may sit in front of the computer while the parents are busying themselves in the kitchen, but on Friday it is all about time together.¹⁰

The reference to ‘easy meals’ recalls Bente Halkier’s work in Denmark where, she argues, there is no direct translation of the English phrase ‘convenience food’ and that ‘easy eating’ is probably the closest alternative (Halkier 2013).

These two Scandinavian cases serve to highlight some of the similarities and differences with the UK examples previously discussed. They hint at the need for more systematic comparative analysis as well as more thorough empirical studies of the audiencing process.¹¹

Conclusion

This paper has explored the relationship between families and food, arguing that changing domestic practices associated with food and eating are a valuable lens on contemporary family life, while changes in family life underpin the commercial challenges of food marketing and retail. The paper began by reviewing a series of recent TV adverts which provide insight into the dynamics and diversity of

¹⁰ Our ethnographic work in the UK provides similar examples of families curling up under a duvet in front of the TV on a Friday night, providing a break from cooking by ordering take-away food.

¹¹ We are currently undertaking such work as part of the ERA-Net SUSFOOD programme. Our project, on Food, Convenience and Sustainability (FOCAS), compares the consumption of different kinds of convenience food in Denmark, Germany, Sweden and the UK. For more details, see the project website: www.sheffield.ac.uk/focas.

contemporary family life. The 'audiencing' of these adverts was then discussed including the way they might be read in different social contexts where, for example, divorced or separated families provide a particular set of circumstances that may have emotional resonance for other kinds of families and household contexts.

Having probed the relationship between families and food in terms of the 'discourse of decline' and the gendered assumptions that attach to 'feeding the family', the paper then explored the particular context of convenience food whose use is commonly subject to negative moralization. Based on ethnographically-informed research, the paper challenged the conventional opposition between convenience and care, arguing that, in some circumstances and on some occasions, the use of convenience food can be justified as an expression of care rather than as evidence of a dereliction of familial duty. The paper also explored the potential for analysing humour as an index of the tensions that arise when cooking and eating in such a highly moralized context. In each case, the paper argues, familial fictions (as depicted in TV advertising for food) are of more than passing interest. As well as their commercial and entertainment value, they are a rich and relatively neglected resource for researching the links between food and family, convenience and care.

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