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“Of course I know that; you told me that years ago”

The acquisition of culinary knowledge
in British families

Angela Meah
University of Sheffield



CONANX Work Package 3

Food Anxieties and Consumer Practice

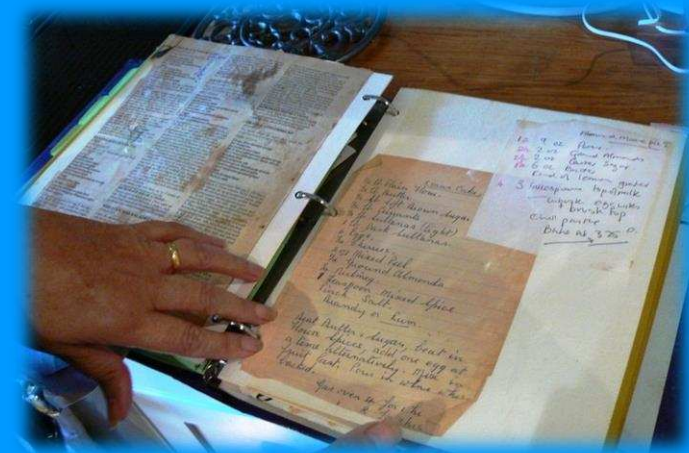
- CONANX Work Package 3 (Peter Jackson and Matt Watson)
- Project responds to claims made regarding a ‘deficit’ in cooking skills and knowledge (see Meah and Watson 2011)
- Explores patterns of continuity and change in family’s domestic kitchen practices within living memory
- Multigenerational household study: 23 participants; 8 extended families; 17 households; 2-4 generations; aged 17-92
- Qualitative and ethnographic methods





Research Question:

How, and under what circumstances, are culinary skills, knowledge and practices transferred, replicated, adapted, rejected or replaced by different generations of the same family?



Mother knows best?

- Dearth of ‘culinary magic’ (Steinberg 1998) reported among ‘war-babies’.
- Absence of ‘cooking apprenticeships’ (see Field 1997; Sutton 2000).

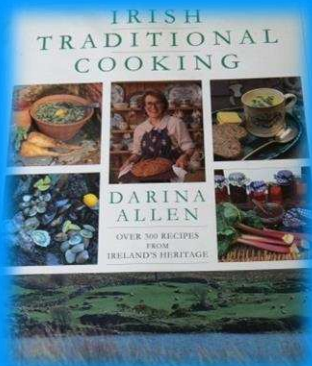
“Our parents were *very good managers*... I think *that generation were very good with leftovers*. We would have a Sunday joint but the cold meat that was left over might be eaten cold on Monday or it might minced up and made into shepherd’s pie erm, it was always used up. Nothing was wasted erm (.) and, and I think, *I think that’s rubbed off onto me*” (Michael Charles, 68).

“*She wasn’t a great cook, but... my mother was very keen to feed people... she was a bit more casual about it bit, bit more erm, global in her intentions and less, maybe less effective than she might be in her execution but she, her intention was to give people a good feed and that’s, I think that’s a great goal in life*” (Ted Anderson, 65).

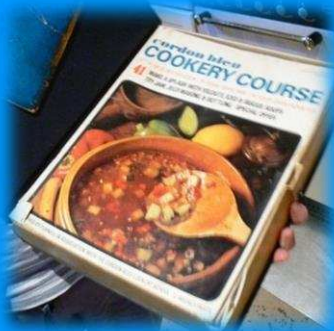




...Or does she?




“I went to a night-class at technical college... and i got to like cooking as well... there was more of a sense of achievement to produce something that looked nice and that (.) you know, wasn't just purely the factor of filling your stomach, it was actually something that maybe looked pretty” (Mary Green, 67).



“I never really learnt to cook until I got married... We were like a trio of late teen, twenty-something women [and] we all got married... and in a countdown to the big day... we went to cookery classes together... we just wanted to learn. But also the feeling that there were new ways of cooking coming over the horizon you know, sort of, different recipes... I remember like, sweet and sour pork, exotic dishes that, yeah, sort of a little taster of this new stuff. I remember having a cheese evening and I don't think we ever ate, you know, anything other than ordinary cheese” (Laura Anderson, 63).

Other sources of knowledge

“I joined er, an organisation er, called house, National Housewives’ Register... Some people had come from abroad or they’d been abroad and we used to have parties didn’t we and we used to take a theme, like a Danish evening or a Greek evening and we’d all come and we’d all prepare some dish or other... and so you had to get your books out and we learnt...and I, we had some amazing evenings and you know, the first time I ever ate vine, stuffed vine leaves, and erm, moussaka, and all those sort of things” (Ailsa Charles, 67).



“What really started me off was I bought a, a cookery book... on Mediterranean cooking (...) [laughing] ‘Wow, this is, is wonderful’... I never stopped cooking really after that... before that that I’d come across Elizabeth David’s cookery books of Mediterranean cooking... (I started) to swallow up that idea of these very simple foods that just need to be cooked with a bit of love and attention really not, without any huge skills but something that needs attention and a sense of understanding flavours and tastes” (Ted Anderson).

Intergenerational transfer of knowledge

“...she would always tell me what she was doing and explain how to cook things, but then I think before I left home, maybe like the summer before I went to university, she properly said: ‘Well you need to learn how to cook and you need to learn how to (.) do these sort of things and understand about, you know, how you defrost food and making sure that if you defrost it you don’t freeze it again’ and all those sorts of things in quite a structured way, so that when I went off to university, also I think she wrote out some recipes of things ...and all the instructions” (Hannah Faulkner, 35).

“I don’t know where my mum’s got that from erm, but she has passed it on to me, she was here on Sunday and I said: ‘Oh I’ve just got this bit of stuffing that’s from last week and I’m, I’m just using this stuff,’ and she said: ‘Do you know what a real good way if you’re just using packet stuff?’ I said ‘Yeah’, and I started saying it: ‘Add a bit of garlic, put some onion in it, I put some bread crumbs in it’, and I just talked it through with her. And she laughed at me, I said: ‘Of course I know that, you told me that years ago’. So she just taught me how to do things and how to pad out things, and if you’re gonna use a sauce, then always add to it” (Liz Elland, 37)

Merging of family practices

“I think I have very different opinions of my mum’s cooking and what I’m now exposed to. So, my mum’s cooking I still see as good because she’s my mum, and I cook similar to my mum.

...So coming into Jonathan’s family where there’s a lot of flavour, a lot of variety, a lot of meals that are just cultivated from an idea or an inspiration or, or a recipe book is... I’ve learnt a lot from Jonathan so, I suppose it’s what, I’m, I’ve been on a journey, I’ve grown up with food (.) been exposed to my mum’s cooking, enjoyed that, been brought into a family that cooks differently, as in the different thinking and approach to food, so I embrace both, I accept both as equally ok. If I compare them (.) Jonathan’s is better [laughs]” (Polly Anderson, 36).





Fathers and sons

“Ready Steady Cook had just started and it was suddenly, it was like, this first time sort of really engaging cookery show that was young and lively and... I kind of joined in with that a little bit I suppose... So, yeah, it just suddenly like you know like roasting peppers and little bits of chicken in a bag of foil and tipping it out onto a plate, and looking, it was great looking food that was cooked easily and simply in 20 minutes... for the first time like really, it just seemed like sort of pushing the boundaries of er our sort of knowledge of food. Getting quite a bit of confidence from being able to churn it out really. So that was that was a big point I think and then I can remember. I was... cooking these things for Dad, who was like ‘Oh that’s good, that’s fabulous, where did you learn to do that?’ Yeah and there was that, a bit of a shift, you know (.) from him doing all the cooking to me prepared to say ‘Well I want to cook because I’ve got something I want to try’ ” (Jonathan Anderson, 38).



Pass it on!

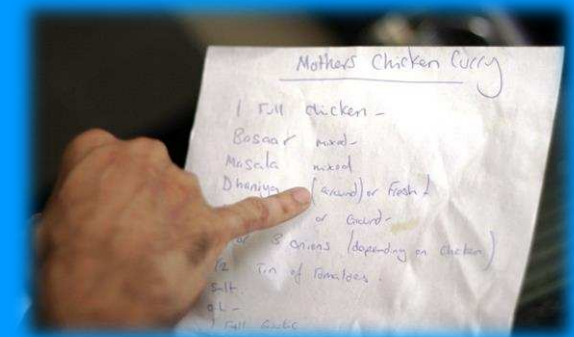
*“I mean to me it’s important that he’s interested in the kitchen and enjoys being in the kitchen, so even if he really enjoyed making it but didn’t eat it, it wouldn’t really bother me (.) um, but yeah, think there was something about (.) putting it in the oven and getting it out and (.) just looking forward to eating it really (.) um, you know **my Dad was there and he was helping out a bit so it’s good fun, it’s making it fun, don’t want it to be like a chore but you know trying to broaden his horizons**” (Jonathan Anderson)*

*“I’ve taught him [son, 19] that you can make the sauce yourself with herbs and a tin of chopped tomatoes and onions and whatever, and garlic, and it can be a damned sight nicer than any sort of packet that you can buy... **for me that’s important that I’ve passed some skills on**, even if it’s just basics to give him the confidence... when he moves out and flies the nest, that **he’ll be able to survive and actually cook for himself and won’t have to rely on others**” (Joe Green, 45).*



“It’s never too early, or never too late to learn”

- AM: Azam was saying that he remembers, sort of a bit like you with you, watching your mum cooking, that you know, you would have them in the kitchen ...
- Nazra: Yeah, they were always you know, like helping me, *they were my little helpers*, they would always come, I didn’t want them to go away ... it’s like a mother saying: ‘*Oh I’m cooking, I’m concentrating, don’t come near me*’, or ‘*Don’t do that*’. *But I would not do that, I would say: ‘Come and look’*. And you know, like this one [granddaughter], she’s only 2, *she will come and put her chair next to me and watch me* [laughs], she’s interested in what you’re cooking, what you’re doing. She will say ‘*I want this*’, she knows what I cook. *It’s never too early or never too late to learn.*



Conclusions

- Different generations report exposure to a range of influences, sources of knowledge.
- Books, TV, magazines a source of inspiration regarding flavours and tastes since the 1950s.
- Family members most likely to be cited as equipping participants with confidence in cooking, nurturing awareness of pleasures of food, cooking, commensality.
- Today's parents concerned with nurturing a positive relationship with cooking/kitchen in children – particularly boys – from an early age.
- 'Deficit' approach to cooking knowledge/skill an indication of current politicisation/moralisation of food. Our data indicates political rhetoric has perhaps run ahead of the evidence.
- Data challenges suggestion that we are a 'deskilled and incapable public [that] "loves to watch" but doesn't actually "do" any cooking' (Wood 2000; Short 2006)