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## **Fathers, food practices and the circuits of intimacy in families in Northern England**

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# Fathers, food practices and the circuits of intimacy in families in Northern England

## Abstract

Informed by a ‘theories of practice’ approach and moving beyond accounts that emphasize domestic foodwork as a wholly feminized task, this paper draws upon a series of ethnographic studies undertaken in Northern England to examine men’s frequently overlooked contributions to feeding the family. Deploying the idea of ‘circuits of intimacy’, it specifically highlights how shopping, cooking and eating form part of the daily emotional practices through which contemporary fathering is negotiated, contested and resisted. In doing so, it contributes to debates concerning fathering and the spaces in which it is undertaken – areas of enquiry that have, until recently, remained relatively hidden in geographical research – as well as addressing the issue of feeding and family intimacy which has been underexplored within studies of fathering.

Keywords: fathering; children; domestic food practices; circuits of intimacy; care

## Introduction

This article reflects upon a series of ethnographic studies conducted in Northern England to examine how domestic foodwork (a complex of practices that includes all the tasks associated with planning, purchasing, storing, preparing food and cleaning up afterward [Meah 2014a]) contributes to the reproduction of family life. I mobilise the concept of ‘circuits of intimacy’ which refers to the way ideas of intimacy and caring practices circulate through time and space, focusing here on food-related activities that take place in a range of spaces, in and beyond the kitchen and which may have emotional significance which extend beyond the moment in which they occur. I draw particular attention to the activities of fathers whose children may not live with them all the time, as well the emotional resonance of previous generations of fathers, now deceased, on their now-adult offspring.

Everyday household provisioning is often described as a labour of love and is widely acknowledged as being highly gendered because of the social and cultural meanings attached to food. These both legitimize the disproportionate burden women bear in feeding the family (Charles and Kerr; DeVault 1991) and inscribe and reinforce gendered subjectivities which normatively position them as ‘carers’ and ‘nurturers’ (Cairns and Johnston 2015). Along with this, there has been a parallel tendency to sentimentalise the cooking of older female relatives in food writing (cf. Steinberg 1998; Meyers 2001; Supski 2013).

In contrast, men’s involvement in cooking is uncoupled from ‘the traditional connection between food, care and femininity, including a relationship of obligation and responsibility’ (Aarseth and Olsen 2008, 282). On the one hand, their involvement with cooking has been depicted as reinforcing conventional ‘manly’ subject positions. Inness (2001) and Neuhaus (2003), for example, have examined the relationship between meat and masculinity in post-war America, a theme which persists in contemporary accounts of food choice (Roos et al. 2001; Sobal 2005), and is often reinforced by a predilection for what are regarded as ‘masculine’ forms of outdoor cooking typically associated with leisure (Alder; Inness 2001; Neuhaus 2003). On the other hand, sociologists such as Oakley (1974), Murcott (1983) and DeVault (1991) have reported that men ‘help’ rather than lead in feeding the family, their contribution optional and often remembered for particular displays of skill (Adler 1981) or its comparative rarity within everyday family foodways. While there is evidence of a shift in how the mutually constitutive relationship between masculine identities and homemaking practices, including cooking, are transforming the meanings that ‘home’ has for its occupants (cf. Gorman-Murray 2008; Szabo and Koch 2017), the ‘theories of practice’ approach I deploy in this paper addresses a particular absence in academic understandings of men’s foodwork. Here, I foreground the caring dimension of what men do with food, which includes but is not limited to cooking. Specifically, I am concerned with

how food practices are enrolled both in the ‘doing’ of fathering and help to facilitate intimacy between fathers and children.

There is nothing particularly novel in utilizing food as a ‘lens’ (Counihan 2004; Jackson 2009) through which to view family life, not least those aspects of it which are pertinent to shifting ideologies concerning gendered subjectivities and relations and spatialized power (Christie 2006; Robson 2006; Supski 2006; Longhurst et al. 2009; Meah and Jackson 2013; Meah 2014a; Liu 2016). However, my interest is not with exploring what distributions of foodwork reveal or make visible about family life. Rather, I am concerned with how the work that goes into feeding the family shapes and constitutes domestic masculinities – defined by Gorman-Murray [2008, 369] as the ways in which ‘both ideals of home and changing homemaking practices have (re)figured masculine identities’ – and relationships. Here, I am particularly concerned with relationships between men and their children and how it makes such relationships possible within the circuits of intimacy around which family life is organised.

### **Circuits of intimacy**

By referring to the ‘circuits of intimacy’ within family life, I draw attention to the complex spatialities and temporalities through which caring relationships are expressed. These circuits may extend beyond the household, operating across different spatial scales (from the supermarket to the kitchen) with little or no regard for physical distance (cf. Holmes 2004; Valentine 2008; Liu 2016). Similarly, intimate and caring relationships may be stretched across generations through the work of memory and the desire to emulate or distance oneself from the models of intimacy and caring provided by one’s parents. The circuits of intimacy that are reproduced through everyday domestic practices therefore involve complex networks and relationships that extend across space and time. By mobilising the idea of ‘circuits of

intimacy’, this paper contributes to debates concerning fathering and the spaces in which it is undertaken, areas of enquiry which Aitken (2005) suggests have remained relatively hidden in geographical discussions of masculinity. It also addresses the issue of feeding, which itself has been underexplored within studies of fathering. In what follows, I respond to Whatmore’s (2006, 606) call for an enhancement of ‘the familiar repertoire of humanist methods that rely on generating talk and text’ by applying a ‘theories of practice’ approach which specifically foregrounds ‘being with’ and ‘doing with’ food (Goodman 2016, 260) in the context of family life.

### **Theories of practice**

A simplified way of understanding social practice theory is to think in terms of the agents who perform or ‘carry’ practices, the resources or ‘things’ that they have at their disposal, and the meanings, motivations and value that practices have for those who perform them (Reckwitz 2002; see also Warde 2005; Delormier et al. 2009 and Røpke 2009 regarding the application of theories of practice in relation to consumption). Since practices are constituted as a ‘nexus of doings and sayings’ (Schatzki 1996, 89), this avoids over-privileging text or discourse, instead opening up spaces for the observation of the doings of practice which are socially recognisable and meaningful to potential observers. Importantly, ‘family’ itself is conceptualised not as a social structure to which individuals belong, but as an active process comprised of a set of socially recognisable practices – including shopping, cooking and eating together – that take on particular meanings associated with family at any given point in time (Morgan 2011). In this sense, family is not just ‘done’, but also ‘displayed’ (Finch 2007), and in increasingly diverse ways.

My concern within this paper is consequently not who is doing what in the kitchen, when and with what frequency; nor indeed do I make a case for the ‘democratisation of

domesticity' (Meah and Jackson 2013). Rather I offer an extended understanding of how men's involvement in foodwork can be mapped onto and has meaning within the circuits of intimacy around which contemporary family life is organised, and which are specifically constitutive of contemporary fathering. Previously I have focused on the situatedness of the kitchen in the emotional topography of home (Meah 2016); here, I explore the contribution of practices, specifically food practices, in facilitating intimate family relationships, indeed in bringing men into relation with their children. While the spatial and temporal dimensions of men's caring through food is foregrounded primarily through the experiences of non-resident fathers, that fathers' foodwork can have ongoing resonance within these circuits of intimacy is illustrated via the accounts of bereaved adult offspring reflecting on their fathers' contributions to feeding the family.

### **Fathers, food and care**

Among sociologists, it has long been acknowledged that to consider women's responsibilities concerning domestic foodwork alone 'is but half the equation' (Murcott 1986, cited in Mennell et al., 1992: 110), and that doing so both undermines men's contribution and reinforces the identity of cooking as a feminine task (Kemmer 2000, 330). Although scholarship regarding how the ideologies surrounding women, men and food are changing (Julier and Lindenfeld 2005) has been slow in responding to these concerns, it is clear that – for feminist geographers – the kitchen and the activities that women undertake therein are no longer conceptualised exclusively in 'oppressive' terms. Indeed, scholarship from across the global north and south have highlighted the 'improvisatory and rebellious' (Floyd 2004, 61) potential of kitchen spaces (see, for example, Christie 2006; Robson 2006; Supski 2006; Longhurst et al. 2009; Meah 2014a). Likewise, men's cooking is featuring as a topic of study as changes in the productive economy have required them to routinely contribute to everyday

domestic foodwork. Combined with the increasingly heterogeneous nature of ‘the family’, these shifts have complicated how gendered roles and responsibilities have been conceptualised and negotiated. In tandem with these structural changes, the proliferation of television lifestyle programmes and accompanying cookbooks has both accelerated the popularity of cooking amongst some men, and has contributed to the reconstitution of domestic cooking as a masculine leisure activity (cf. Hollows 2003; Feasey 2008), thereby giving men a ‘legitimate place at the stove’ (Swenson 2009, 47).

Prior to this shift, men’s involvement in cooking had been characterised primarily as temporally marked leisure (Daniels and Glorieux 2017), something electively chosen (Mennell et al. 1992) and often limited to weekend breakfasts and particularly ‘manly’ forms of cooking, including barbecues, roast dinners or special occasion cooking (Adler 1981; Dummit 1998) designed to receive admiration and applause (Inness 2001). Within the current framing of men’s involvement in foodwork, cooking is acknowledged as being a task that has been appropriated by men because of the creative potential it offers (Daniels and Glorieux 2017; cf. Kemmer 2000). It has also been distinguished from women’s quotidian activities in terms of either its sociality (Brownlie and Hewer 2007; Leer 2013; Neuman et al. 2016) or its framing as ‘leisure’ (e.g. Roos et al. 2001; Hollows 2003; Feasey 2008; Aarseth 2009; Cairns et al. 2010). However, as Daniels and Glorieux (2017, 33) point out, such dichotomised stereotypes risk ignoring the complexity of men’s everyday kitchen practices, which – importantly – are neither limited solely to cooking, nor separate from the broader complex of domestic obligations and responsibilities within which they are entangled (see Meah 2017).

Few scholars have foregrounded the place that men’s foodwork activities have within the broader domestic ‘landscape of care’ (Milligan and Wiles 2010), and men often continue to be depicted as playing a supporting role (Metcalf et al. 2009; Curtis et al. 2009).

Exceptions to this include Szabo’s (2014) acknowledgment of men’s desire to nurture

through food, something which is often achieved through their role in food procurement (cf. Russell 2007; Naguib 2015). Among those who have explicitly foregrounded how men's foodwork is constitutive of care is Russell (2007), who reports on older men's transition from breadwinner to food preparer in the event of a spouse becoming incapacitated through illness. At the other end of the life-course, Owen and colleagues (2010) discuss how fathers frame a determination to offer their children food choices in terms of supporting healthy emotional development.

The relative invisibility, within the literature, of men's increasing involvement in family care-giving (and feeding the family specifically) is attributable to its feminisation (England and Dyck 2014), prompting an appeal for 'more sensitive readings of masculinities and caregiving' (ibid., 292). Men's roles as fathers is one example of this, with scholarship increasingly distinguishing between 'fatherhood', as a social construction, and 'fathering', as a series of social practices performed by individuals who may or may not be biologically related to a child (Meah and Jackson 2016). While some have drawn attention to the emergence of more intimate forms of involved fathering (Aitken 2005; 2009; Dermott 2009) and the 'awkward' spaces in which the daily emotional practices that constitute fathering are negotiated and contested (Aitken 2005), it is consistently recognised that fathering is a relational practice. On the one hand, contemporary fathering practices are recognised as evolving from men's own experiences of being fathered (Olmstead et al. 2009; Meah and Jackson 2016); on the other hand, they continue to be constituted 'in parallel or in opposition to' those of mothers (Aitken 2000, 585; for a discussion of this, see Meah and Jackson 2016).

While Aitken (2005; 2009) has acknowledged that fathering is something which is negotiated in different spaces, a number of studies reporting men's contributions to children's carescapes have emphasized how their caring activities often take place outside the home. These include escorting children in the spaces between home and school (Barker 2008), or in

outdoor spaces (Brandth and Kvande 1998; Tarrant 2013) where it is more likely to be associated with leisure or play. Less visible are the more mundane spaces of care and the activities which occur within them; spaces such as supermarkets, where women are acknowledged as ‘making love’ through sacrifice, thrift and care for other family members (Miller 1998), a description not usually attributed to men’s parallel activities. A further consideration is that an increase in the numbers of children being parented across more than one household following separation or divorce has meant that for some men, fathering identities have been renegotiated to include more mundane forms of care from which they may have previously been exempted (Troilo and Coleman 2013). Rather than being experienced as a labour or a burden, the ordinariness of activities such as cooking and shopping are recognised as having the potential to facilitate intimacy and help maintain father-child relationships (ibid.).

Contemporary narratives of intimacy have explained how personal relationships have shifted from being functional toward what Jamieson (1998) refers to as a model of ‘disclosing intimacy’ which, while being more emotionally intense, is also more ephemeral. In this context, Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (1995) suggest that children have become a more reliable source of love within families. In view of this, here I focus on the circuits of intimacy that exist in relationships between fathers and children which, because of the instability of couple relationships, increasingly require management across different temporalities and spaces of care.

Acknowledging that intimacy is socially recognisable in mundane actions (Tomlie 2010), such as shopping, cooking and eating together, and refers to a quality of relationships or actions rather than the action itself (cf. Tomlie 2010; Morgan 2011), here I examine how fathering is negotiated through foodwork. My aim is to explore how the practices around

food are valued as ways of ‘making relationships visible’ (Strathern 1992, as discussed in Graeber 2005, 448), indeed can make relationships possible.

In what follows, I illustrate how men’s foodwork might be reassessed within the everyday domestic economy of care if we examine what they do, neither as relative to that of women, or by judging the type of food provided (cf. Curtis et al. 2009). Foregrounding and making visible men’s actual food practices and examining the motivations underpinning them, their practical significance and emotional consequences, opens up the possibility of reconsidering how their foodwork might be valued within the temporal and spatially dynamic circuits of intimacy around which family life is organised. Observing these practices in the range of spaces they take place in, listening to how they are rationalised by men, and making relational connections with the wider inter-generational circuits of intimacy to which these men belong can facilitate a reassessment of men’s role in feeding the family. This involves examining what men do in terms of the meaning of their actions and the love that goes into them, which have emotional and symbolic significance.

## **Methodology**

My arguments emerge from reflections on a series of ethnographic studies undertaken in Northern England over the last six years. These were ‘Consumer Culture in an Age of Anxiety’ and ‘Food, Convenience and Sustainability’, both led by Peter Jackson. ‘Being a Man’ was a pilot study led by the author. Of the 39 participants – all identified through pseudonyms – I have worked with across these studies, 15 were men who were routinely involved in cooking, shopping and wider kitchen practices, many being either partnerless or having primary responsibility for provisioning within their household. Their ages ranged from 30 to mid-70s; all identified as being heterosexual, and all but two were social or biological fathers. Some were fathers or grandfathers in cohabiting relationships; some were

single fathers with shared care of their children. Their social and economic backgrounds varied: at one end of the spectrum was an asylum-seeker who, without permission to work and no access to state benefits, had virtually no income. At the other were retired professionals as well as men currently employed in a range of occupations: from those who did manual work in factories or outdoors, to those who occupied senior management positions. While men who lived alone obviously had no choice, among the rest neither social class background, ethnicity, education or economic status appeared to influence their willingness to routinely engage in different aspects of foodwork.

These studies have attempted to address the epistemological limitations of some earlier work on domestic food practices based exclusively on interview data, surveys and/or time-use diaries. Taking a theories of practice approach facilitates a conceptual shift that foregrounds the ‘doings’, and not just the reported ‘sayings’ of participants. In order to achieve this, I employed a mixed method, qualitative and visual ethnographic approach across each of these studies. This aimed to go beyond what is accessible via purely discursive accounts in order to address the performative and (temporally and spatially) dynamic character of everyday domestic life. Depending on the household context, different combinations of methods were used, including (life history) interviews, kitchen tours, provisioning ‘go-alongs’ (Kusenbach 2003) in the form of accompanied shopping trips and garden/allotment tours, filmed cooking observations (sometimes coinciding with an interview), photography and participant-generated auto-ethnographic video. This combination of methods reveals something of the ways in which family life is enacted and performed in practice for both real and imagined audiences (including my presence as a researcher). Acknowledging that social life is always ‘staged’ to varying degrees and that one can never have unmediated access to what really transpires within households, engaging with participants’ spontaneous streams of experiences and practices as they moved through, and

interacted with their physical and social environments during repeat visits to each household (Kusenbach 2003,463) facilitates a more nuanced understanding than is available through talk alone.

In what follows I examine how the beings and doings of, with and around food create an intimate space for fathering. Specifically, I explore how subjectivities and social relations are shaped through particular activities and in particular spaces within and beyond the home. I begin by examining how the practices surrounding shopping, cooking and eating not only open up spaces of intimacy within kitchens and supermarkets for fathers and children, but are practices through which fathering identities are actively negotiated and resisted. Given the social shift away from men's roles purely as 'providers' toward more intimate forms of fathering, I then interrogate the issue of what constitutes 'caring' within the circuits of intimacy facilitated by their foodwork activities. I examine how some fathers express love and devotion to their children through their provisioning practices which may, or may not be, consistent with discourses of 'healthy' food choice. I conclude my analysis by focussing on the temporally dynamic nature of circuits of intimacy, exploring how dead fathers' cooking is remembered by their adult offspring.

### **Intimate spaces/spaces for intimacy**

Where men have been present within academic analyses of foodwork, these have tended to focus on their culinary activities with less attention afforded to the broader spectrum of provisioning practices and how these are negotiated within the wider exigencies of everyday life. My ethnographic research made visible a broader engagement with different aspects of provisioning which contribute to the circuits of intimacy which exist between men and their children, especially those fathers who did not live with their children's mother. This was particularly evident in the auto-ethnographic material, which was spontaneously recorded,

rather than directed by specific in-the-moment questions from me. Among my participants was Roger (50, White British) who was employed full-time as a senior manager in a multi-national engineering company. He works extremely long hours and is separated from the mother of his two youngest children, Simon (9) and Libby (7), who live with their mother, but stay overnight with him two or three times a week. Roger kept what he conceptualised as a 'video-diary', over a six-week period recording a range of moments which he felt were relevant to his sense of 'being a man'. As with other men involved in this particular study (all of whom were, or had been, single fathers), fathering emerged as central to Roger's sense of domestic masculinity. Along with various car journeys and a day-trip (cf. Barker 2008), Roger filmed meal preparation and the ensuing washing up on evenings that his children were staying over, along with – on one occasion – the consumption of the meal. During this, the camera was left recording the family as they ate. Here, we see a father asking his children what they had done at school during the week. The scene is strikingly intimate, a seemingly unselfconscious moment together as a family – just a father and his young children sharing food and conversations about subjects as diverse as the Fair Trade movement and nuclear war.

Rather than being an austere father who enforces manners and dictates acceptable conversation and proper behaviour at the table (cf. Charles and Kerr 1988), Roger is *'fun'*, gentle, approachable and easily manages to explain complex and unpleasant ideas even to a young child. This footage reveals a harmonious display of family togetherness through the sharing of a meal in which the participants are invited to share something of themselves at the end of the day. It is an 'intimate' family moment.

In my reflexive interview with Roger, I noted that his collection of footage did not include any time alone with Libby. He explained that since her hobbies and interests were things that she shared with her mother, 'we don't really get that much time alone'.

Spontaneously, he added that during the time that he and Libby have to kill while Simon is at his music lesson, ‘we go shopping together. She really enjoys doing that with me, because she can then pick, she picks the food and what-have-you, she can pick the things she likes’. Told from the perspective of a father and, more importantly, one who is no longer resident in the family home, indulging his daughter’s food preferences does not position him as a ‘pushover’ (cf. Curtis et al. 2009). In the absence of a shared interest over which they can spend meaningful time together, shopping fills that gap in providing a space for intimacy which is exclusive to father and daughter. It is time spent productively while waiting for Simon, in which Libby does not have to compete with her brother, nor with his preferences and desires.

My work with another lone father revealed how foodwork opened a different type of space for intimacy within the social relations of the family, this time with slightly older children. Dave (47, White British) shares equal residency of his sons, Harvey (13) and Jack (10), with his ex-wife, which has to be arranged around his shifts in the fire service. The older boy took responsibility for filming within this household using his own video camera. While the physical presence of the researcher does not intrude upon the activities and conversations recorded, in one particular moment of family intimacy my absent presence (Gibson 2005) is perhaps felt through a discussion of ‘manliness’ which seemingly spontaneously arises during the course of meal preparation. In the following scene, Harvey suggests that cooking is a ‘manly’ activity. Dave questions this interpretation, asking him to explain. His brother, Jack, responds with an alternative stereotype.

Harvey	This is a baba [father]... He is cooking our food and that is very manly.
Dave	Is it?
Harvey	Yeah
Dave	Why is it manly?
Harvey	[hesitates] Well most people think that only women cook
Dave	Do they? [surprised]

Jack            Well it's said that, like, women stay at home and clean and,  
 Harvey        Yeh and look after the children, well yeh...  
 Dave            I thought that more men stopped at home. Do your friends' parents stop at  
                     home, dads stop at home?  
 Harvey        Some, but not a lot.  
 Dave            So would it make you more or less likely to cook when you get older, seeing  
                     me cook all the time?

Here, meal preparation is enrolled in the project of fathering which, for Dave, involves a responsibility to ensure both that his sons' understanding of sexist ideology does not go un-interrogated, and that they are likewise exposed to positive messages about race and sexuality (as observed in subsequent footage). Rather than being a discrete practice with an end objective (the production of a meal), cooking is revealed to be part of an assemblage of practices cohering around the active process of 'family', and is one that enables Dave to fulfil his role as a parent on multiple levels. While it allows him to fulfil a practical responsibility to feed his children, it also facilitates what he perceives to be wider moral and social responsibilities as a parent. Indeed, cooking emerges as less important than the opportunities it provides. Here, not only does the kitchen and activities that take place therein provide a backdrop against which Dave's relationships with his sons are shaped, but they also provide a safe space in which potentially challenging conversations about equality and diversity can take place.

While we do not know how the children experience these moments of family intimacy, we might begin to understand how these encounters with and around food have meaning for Roger and Dave if we contextualise these practices against their own experiences of being fathered (cf. Meah and Jackson 2016). Neither Roger nor Dave reported sharing domestic intimacy with their own fathers. Roger's father was a bully, 'a brutal, sarcastic, violent, quick-to-temper person' feared by his children. In contrast, Dave characterised his father as being fairly passive, reporting a sense of frustration that he had not been interested in 'teaching me or anything like that'. The 'lack' reported in their respective

relationships with their own fathers arguably motivates and gives meaning to Roger and Dave's enrolment of foodwork within the circuits of intimacy they endeavour to create with their own children. Observing the doings of food practices allows us to see how cooking, shopping and eating enable these men to do fathering differently from the earlier generation: Roger is fun, approachable, caring; Dave teaches his sons about equality and diversity. Arguably, their doings with food help shape their relationships with their children and address the type of intimacy each reports as lacking in their respective relationships with their own fathers. While this may have relatively short-term affective value, the longer-term significance perhaps lies in their knowledge that they are also shaping the adults that they hope their children will become.

### **What 'caring' looks like in the context of food**

In their much referenced feminist theory of caring, Berenice Fisher and June Tronto (1990, 40) have suggested that human 'needs' change with different contexts involving power relations that 'affect the content, definition, distribution and boundaries of caring activities'. Consequently, they argue, the caring process is not a gracefully unfolding one, but one where different components often clash with each other. Moreover, the intentions motivating how and why individuals care for, or about, or give care to someone may not be returned in the form of appreciation by the recipient.

The significance of changing contexts and how these might affect the boundaries, definitions and distributions of caring is particularly pertinent to separated fathers, who may find themselves presented with the responsibility of feeding children, a task that had often been shared – at least to some degree – with their former partners. Tony (White British, 56), a full-time academic, was one such case. Tony had separated from his wife a few months prior to my working with him, his 12-year old daughter, Georgia, staying with him – in theory – a

couple of nights a week. He reported that the deterioration of his marriage had been reflected in the couple's food practices, resulting in the neglect of shopping and a consequent reliance on take-away food and ready-meals. Although he and his wife had cooked, he acknowledges that this had been 'in a slightly sort of (...) not in a very caring or care-ful way', prompting him to reflect: 'it's interesting just how broke, without realising it, things had broken down a bit just in terms of normal behaviours'. This observation points toward Tony's understanding that activities such as shopping and cooking are 'normal' and socially recognisable practices which both constitute and 'display' family.

Reflecting on the provisioning patterns that he had fallen into during his marriage, Tony draws attention to 'that dynamic of shopping for a family, [when, as a parent] you tend to not buy things that you individually like'. This meant that although he would 'buy things that I knew only Georgia liked, desserts... sweet things... and all that sort of crap', he had simultaneously stopped buying items exclusively for himself, things he says 'nobody else would want to share particularly, or approve of either'. He also acknowledges that sacrificing one's own preferences to those of children in the family home is a 'common pattern'. It is a socially accepted, socially recognised and, perhaps, expected practice that occurs without conscious reflection.

After establishing his own household, at least some of these practices persist since the freezer and cupboards contain items such as ice cream, popcorn, crisps, chocolate and biscuits. Tony's actions reveal his anticipation of his daughter's needs and preferences, presumably to ensure that she feels less out-of-place when she visits his new home. Even though he is physically absent from Georgia's daily life, this space does not mean that she is out of his thoughts, nor does it necessarily undermine their intimacy (cf. Holmes 2004; Valentine 2008; Liu 2016). Although Tony provides his daughter with things he identifies as 'crap', they clearly have meaning and are valued – at least by him – within the domestic

economy of care. Regardless of how inconsistent his food practices might be in terms of discourses of child nutrition, 'junk' foods have 'love value' (Parkin 2006, 30) and are perhaps utilised as a resource by Tony to demonstrate care and devotion to his daughter's needs, irrespective of whether he shares a home with her. Moreover, since Georgia also suffers from anorexia – a condition that had previously led to her hospitalisation – it is perhaps the case that this is all she is prepared to eat. In this context, Tony's actions, arguably, have significance that go beyond discourses of either 'good food' or 'good parenting', since any food has value when a child refuses to eat.

Across these studies, it was evident that shops, markets and supermarkets featured in the circuits of intimacy. For fathers in cohabiting relationships these spaces were often beyond the surveillance of mothers, where men could share intimate family time with their children. Here, men were perhaps able to feel that they were being '*a good father*' in making purchases that have particular love-value. Accompanying some fathers shopping not only revealed the lengths to which they went to make their children happy through their provisioning practices, but also what shrewd and skilful shoppers they were (cf. Owen et al. 2010). Stuart (42, White British), for example, is married and has two children, Rachel (7) and Ben (5). Both he and his wife work full-time and Stuart is responsible for all of the planning, shopping and cooking in the household. Highlighting the fluidity of different masculine identities in the slippage between the workplace and home (cf. Smith and Winchester 1998), Stuart applies knowledge and skills acquired through his job in IT to devise menu and recipe databases that help him plan weekly meals and ensure that he and his wife enjoy a varied diet (cf. Meah 2014b).

I accompanied Stuart shopping at six o'clock one morning, when he made a 20 mile round trip from his rural home to do the weekly shopping, undertaken between a large supermarket and an outdoor market where fruit and vegetables were bought (see figure 1).



Figure 1. Stuart buying groceries at the market

The go-along is fast-paced since Stuart needed to complete the shopping, get home, unpack the perishable items and then leave for work by eight o'clock. Recurring phrases as we swept through the deserted aisles are, 'Ben likes... Rachel likes...'. Rachel, for example, 'will not touch lettuce that has got any white on it' and she likes 'really red apples... she's a bit particular, very fussy,' explains Stuart. She is also highly capricious in her tastes, a fact that is explained when Stuart decides to take advantage of an offer on a particular branded flavour of crisps that Rachel likes. Indeed, he acknowledges the possibility that his efforts to please (or at least not receive complaint from) her may well be met with rejection, 'you know what's gonna happen though, I'll get home and she won't want them' (cf. Charles and Kerr 1988; DeVault 1991; Burrige and Barker 2009).

Stuart's endeavours demonstrate how fathers 'make love in supermarkets' (Miller 1998) which – in his case – is also manifested through a range of thrifty practices (shopping

around and looking for reductions and special offers) which, while being time-consuming and not particularly convenient, serve a wider goal of enabling him to feed his family well but within a budget. That he achieved a great deal of satisfaction from this was evident in his exchanges with me.

Via direct observation, we see how different discourses and types of knowledge – experiential, motivational, practical – are brought to bear through a series of bodily and mental activities in Stuart’s shopping practices. Here they are assessed and perhaps traded off against each other to fulfil a wider motivation to eat good food while accommodating the children’s tastes and preferences, as well as his wife’s expectations regarding provenance, and to do so within a strict budget. The time and care that Stuart puts into all of this is undoubtedly an act of love. What men like Stuart, Tony and others like them do through their provisioning choices reveals that food is not just a ‘commodity’ or a thing; it is part of the technology of love within families (Miller 1998). Whether through sacrificing one’s own tastes and preferences or the procurement of a particular type of lettuce, apple or flavour of crisps, the gifts of sacrifice and attendance to the desires of others (consciously or otherwise), have meaning and love-value, at least on the part of the giver. However, regardless of the motivations behind particular food practices, these may not be recognised – may not even be visible, let alone appreciated or valued – by the object of one’s care (cf. Fisher and Tronto 1990).

### **Remembering fathers’ cooking**

While some studies have provided evidence of children (and partners) speaking in pejorative terms regarding fathers’ culinary efforts (often because it is seen in relational terms vis-à-vis mother’s cooking [cf. Curtis et al. 2009]), within my own data I found several examples of men and women reflecting with fondness on experiences with fathers. Since most of these

men are now deceased, this perhaps adds symbolic weight to the encounters with food recalled, meaning that they serve a different role in the circuits of intimacy within these families. However, it also means that I am unable to question them directly about their practices and motivations and must rely on the narrative accounts of their offspring instead.

Liz (56, White British), for example, spoke with warmth about her coalminer father's efforts to raise his five daughters following the death of their mother when the youngest was only three-months old. She reflects that while they were very poor and most of the cooking was done by her eldest sister, their father endeavoured to make sure that they at least went to school with a hot, nutritious meal inside them. This consisted of a 'horrendous porridge', of which Liz says:

- LB ...he used to put all sorts in this porridge, oh there was everything, eggs, the lot and I,  
 AM What was that about? Giving you really good, good start to the day?  
 LB Stick to your ribs yeah, and that's what he used to do and he used to make it in this big [laughs] I can still see it now (...) it used to have white lumps in it, that was the egg that had cooked... but we did eat it and we used to put honey in it and all sorts of stuff in this porridge [laughs] and I'll tell you what, it tasted pretty good actually.

Presumably, Liz's father drew upon his knowledge of food and applied common-sense logic in devising a conceptually unappetising concoction that he believed would provide a cheap source of protein and a hot meal to start the day. While clearly a functional practice, for an emotively involved Liz, as well as an impartial observer, this is principally a socially recognisable act of care and devotion. Liz locates her father's efforts to ensure that his daughters were well-fed within a wider narrative that depicts a childhood characterised by a culture of love and happiness in spite of the absence of a mother. The fact that these memories are recounted with laughter can perhaps be read as an expression of intimacy; it certainly is not one of resentment or a sense of having missed out in any way.

Among those participants who grew up in the 1970s, more socially recognisable divisions of labour and related food practices were reported: fathers worked long hours during the week, perhaps contributing to the washing up after the evening meal (a responsibility often shared with children) while housewife-mothers reigned in the kitchen. The exception to this was perhaps one meal at the weekend (cf. Adler 1981). Elizabeth (37, White British) reports that during her childhood, ‘the kitchen was my mum’s domain apart from on Saturdays... when my dad used to do a dinner for the family [laughs]’. On these occasions, a space for fathering is opened up in a domain from which Elizabeth’s father is generally excluded. Of this, she recalls

It was the same thing every week, there was bacon, sausages, beans, chips, fried egg, it was like the full big fry up... I’ll always remember Basil Brush and Dr Who [on the television] and a big fry up, erm, every Saturday, and my mum complaining about the mess that he would leave in the kitchen, because it was her job to clean it up after him... It was just, you know, it was, they’re nice memories, they’re really nice memories.

While one might interpret Elizabeth’s fond recollections of her father’s weekly culinary ritual as symbolically enhanced because of its comparative rarity, there is perhaps more to this than meets the eye. Indeed, it is possible that prospective memory features in Elizabeth’s narrative, since her father was – at the time of interview – being treated for cancer, a disease to which he would succumb by the time I completed my work with her. It is perhaps the case that Elizabeth was not only remembering an important weekly ritual within her childhood, but also imagining a time when he will not be around to replicate or recall those memories with her, when their significance may be enhanced through the lens of loss.

My participants’ stories of their step/fathers’ involvement in family feeding were often reported with humour, the value attached to what men did arising not from the material quality of the food that was gifted, but from the action itself and the meanings it had on the part of the giver. A literal account of this was provided by Joe (45, White Irish), who told me

about being introduced, aged nine, to his late stepfather, Roy. Rather than visiting with a bunch of flowers and a comic or some other tokens that a young woman and her little boy might have appreciated and/or found romantic, instead Roy ‘wooded’ Joe’s mother with a 56-pound sack of potatoes, hoping that he would be invited to stay for dinner. Presumably, he anticipated that this would have more value – symbolic as well as material – to a young woman with little money and to whom the potato has particular cultural significance.

As children, these participants perhaps did not anticipate that stories of their step/fathers’ foodwork might feature within individual family folklore. Their in-the-moment experiences may have been characterised by a combination of disgust, confusion and disappointment, or been overshadowed – in Elizabeth’s case – by complaints from her mother. In the same way that distance does not necessarily foreclose intimacy between family members, neither does death, since emotional intimacy can be maintained through memory. Whether any of these participants would be able to honestly say that their fathers’ efforts at feeding the family were appreciated at the time remains unknown, but their value within the circuits of intimacy is enhanced with time, not infrequently filtered or reinterpreted through the experience of loss.

## **Conclusion**

In this paper, I have examined how food does more than provide a lens through which to understand family life or gendered subjectivities and relations. I have argued that the doings with and around food belong to a complex of practices which both contribute to temporal and spatially dynamic circuits of intimacy within families, as well as being constitutive in the active doing of ‘family’ itself.

I have applied a theories of practice approach which foregrounds not just activities such as shopping and cooking, but the people who undertake them, the ‘things’ or resources

they have at their disposal, and the meanings, motivations and significance of particular practices for those who perform them. Although shopping and cooking are functional and embodied practices involving particular knowledges, skills and competencies, my focus in this paper has been the meanings and motivations underlying particular practices and how these consequently contribute to the doing of intimate fathering practices. While fathering has largely been excluded from scholarship concerning the geographies of masculinities, and foodwork an under-researched area within studies of fathering, this paper has attempted to bridge these gaps. It extends current understandings of the complex geographies of care (cf. Conradson 2003) by bringing to life the ways in which foodwork is not only enrolled in the active process of doing family, but also constitutes men's relationships with their children, thereby contributing to the doing of more emotionally intimate forms of fathering than practiced by earlier generations. This is particularly salient among fathers who do not see their children on a daily basis, or who may not have female partners to either act as emotional buffers or undertake the practical responsibilities of feeding visiting children.

While it has been suggested that men's care tends to be temporally organised around particularly masculine spaces and activities, these data illustrate how an examination of men's foodwork extends understandings of the temporal and spatially dynamic nature of fathering. Foodwork can provide opportunities for men to 'make love in supermarkets' (Miller 1998), either in sharing intimate one-to-one time with a child, or in anticipating their desires and preferences through the acquisition of high value, but nutritionally problematic, foods. It can also provide a space through which to negotiate and resist fathering and parenting identities. Foodwork can open up spaces to be, and do family in socially recognisable ways such as sharing oneself at a mealtime, and it can intersect with other dimensions of fathering, for example, when food preparation might provide an unthreatening backdrop for potentially difficult or awkward conversations. Importantly, although fathers'

involvement in foodwork in previous generations may have been less frequent or visible, it may take on new resonance when enhanced with time and through the lens of loss, memory providing an ongoing sense of emotional intimacy.

Although my participants never articulated their food practices in terms of intimacy, love or care, quite clearly this is the work that their activities fulfilled. Equally, they did not depict their roles or responsibilities as being gendered; they were simply cooking, shopping, planning meals and spending time with their children. While there is a long way to go before foodwork can be uncoupled from gender, making visible men's doings with food in increasingly complex carescapes is a step toward understanding how these can be re-valued within the circuits of intimacy that constitute everyday life.

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