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‘Because It’s Quicker in the Microwave, isn’t It?’ Using *Ethnographic Episodes* to Go Beyond Words in Food Research

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Abstract

Ethnographic methods offer valuable insights into everyday practices, but their time-intensive nature can make them impractical for many qualitative research projects. This article explores how *ethnographic episodes* – observational encounters combining elements of go-along interviews and participant observation – can augment traditional interview methods while remaining practical and feasible. We draw upon a longitudinal study of food provisioning among low-income mothers in Sheffield, UK, in which we conducted *ethnographic episodes* with ten participants. The episodes variously involved shopping, preparing food, and eating together in participants’ everyday environments. We demonstrate that these episodes are valuable in revealing the entanglements of food provisioning, highlighting the impact of skills and constraints on food practices, moving understandings beyond ‘what is said’, and offering insights into the relational dynamics of food provisioning. The method attends to embodied knowledges, practices, and situated relational processes – and the temporal dimensions of these – that may elude articulation in the interview setting. The *ethnographic episodes* also generated conversations on themes outside the project topic guide. While not always strictly related to the research questions, these offered ethically sensitive opportunities to the researcher to demonstrate genuine interest in participants’ lives. *Ethnographic episodes* inevitably present certain methodological challenges. Attention is needed to considerations of authenticity and reactivity, alongside more practical matters of timing, equipment, and transcription. Researchers must also be prepared to navigate the sometimes ambiguous insider and outsider positionalities arising from being an outsider in an insider’s space. We assert that when carefully planned, implemented, and conceptualised as performative interventions, *ethnographic episodes* offer an eminently practicable way to generate rich analytical insights. These potentials extend far beyond this article’s focus on food practices to broad topics in everyday life.

Keywords

ethnographic methods, food practices, qualitative methodology, go-along interviews, multimodal research

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Introduction

Ethnographic methods are characterised by researchers’ immersion in their participants’ worlds, and valuably offer rich and detailed insights into everyday practices. Yet, ethnographic approaches are time-consuming for researchers and participants, so are not always practical. Moreover, despite the centrality of the ‘everyday’ to ethnographic research, practices such as food provisioning that are largely rooted in the home can be, for both practical and ethical reasons, difficult to explore within

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traditional ethnographic approaches (Evans, 2012). Researchers have therefore sought innovative means of balancing the rich understandings available through ethnographic approaches against the reality of such time-intensive methods (Carter & Davies, 2024; Davies & Carter, 2025).

This article explores our experiences of using *ethnographic episodes* when researching food practices among low-income mothers. We first discuss existing methods used in food research before outlining our methodological approach. We then critically examine the value of *ethnographic episodes*, reflecting upon their considerable methodological and substantive potential alongside attendant challenges and possible responses. In so doing, this approach responds to time as a resource for both participants and researchers. It offers a way of working with participants who have busy lives, facilitating researchers to adapt to participant circumstances. It also challenges the conventional ethnographic assumption that extended time and presence are necessary to generate meaningful data. We contribute to methodological debates by demonstrating how ethnographic insight can be generated through episodic engagement rather than complete immersion. While we draw on our experiences from a project exploring food practices, we believe that our methodological reflections are relevant to a diverse range of everyday practices.

Fieldwork in Food Research

Highlighting the value of ethnographic methods does not mean that more traditional interview techniques lack value, or that the prominence of ‘innovative’ methods makes canonical methods outdated (Wiles et al., 2011). Indeed, qualitative interviews have been widely deployed in food studies to explore the invisible labour of food provisioning (Devault, 1991), in developing indicators to assess food poverty (Radimer et al., 1990, 1992), and in highlighting the stigma experienced by people using food banks (Purdam et al., 2015).

Researchers have nonetheless forged imaginative methods that recognise the limitations of verbal methods and harness the collective strengths of diverse methodologies. In particular, techniques have been developed in response to the verbal privilege inherent in traditional interview methods, seeking to complement and add richness to spoken accounts. Food researchers have drawn on a ‘methodological toolbox’ (Joosse & Marshall, 2020, p. 608) of approaches either singly or in combination to explore diverse food practices (see Table 1). These endeavours respond to Murcott’s (2000) call to differentiate between ‘*studies of what actually happens, of what people are really busily doing, based on observation, watching and recording, in person or on film or video; and studies of what people report happens, and of what they think ought to happen, based on interviews, completed questionnaires or diaries*’ (p. 76). Given our project’s substantive focus on food provisioning, we were keen to move ‘*beyond the standard interview*’ (Bagnoli, 2009, pp. 547–548) to enhance the interview accounts with rich insights that get closer to how food practices are lived.

Table 1. Methods Used in Food Research

Family of methods	Technique ¹	Features
Spatial techniques	Shop-alongs	The researcher accompanies and observes the participant on a shopping trip (Isaacs et al., 2022; Joosse & Marshall, 2020; Thompson et al., 2013)
	Kitchen tours, fridge stories, fridge inspections	The participant shows and discusses food items in their fridge and elsewhere (Daly, 2020; Joosse & Marshall, 2020; Waitt & Phillips, 2016)
Visual techniques	Photography, drawing, image elicitation	Enables participants to engage with the sensory and material aspects of food (O’Connell, 2013; Thompson et al., 2015)
Written methods	Food diaries, food logs, scrapbooks	Offers insights into consumption patterns and participants’ feelings about these (Joosse & Marshall, 2020; Wills et al., 2016)
Observational methods	Participant observation	Observational methods vary from being more detached, such as by observing food practices in others (Johnston & Longhurst, 2012; Longhurst et al., 2009), through to more participatory, such as taking part in so-called ‘cookalongs’ (Hall et al., 2020)
Embodied methods	The researcher uses their body to generate knowledge and understanding	The researcher eats with participants and reflects upon this experience (Hall et al., 2020; Longhurst et al., 2008) or explores the role of the body in cooking (Brady, 2011)

1. The terminology used to describe different approaches is variable and not always consistent.

Extending the Ethnographic in Food Research

Ethnography has been defined as ‘*the disciplined and deliberate witness-cum-recording of human events*’ (Willis & Trondman, 2000, p. 5). Ethnographic research involves spending extended periods of time with participants to gain understandings of their practices and way of life in a more direct yet natural way than the back-and-forth questioning of traditional interviewing. The approach centres people as experts in their own lives, prioritising observation over interrogation, and fostering empathy.

By participating in participants’ social worlds, ethnographic research is well placed to challenge traditional researcher-researched binaries, encouraging the formation of ‘*verstehen*’ (Weber, 1978, p. 5) – seeing the world from participants’ perspectives to represent ‘*at least partly in its own terms, the irreducibility of human experience*’ (Willis & Trondman, 2000, p. 5). This radical empathy allows researchers both to document what people *do*, and to develop understanding of how people *make sense* of their experiences. Building on this tradition, our project introduces *ethnographic episodes* as a way of extending the ethnographic sensibility in food research. By foregrounding the episodic, we aim to bring sustained attention to the embodied, relational, and temporal dimensions of food provisioning in ways that complement and move beyond verbal accounts.

Feeding a Family on a Low Income: The Research

The research explored food provisioning among mothers on a low income, in Sheffield, a city in the United Kingdom. The project sought to understand the twin challenges of food insecurity alongside sustainable diets, topics that intersect but remain largely detached in existing literature (Garratt & Jackson-Taylor, 2024).

We employed a multi-modal, longitudinal, qualitative strategy comprising three fieldwork waves. The first two waves comprised in-depth qualitative interviews. Wave one (n=17) focussed on mothers’ everyday food practices and also used a card sort activity to explore environmentally sustainable food practices (Brent et al., 2021). Wave two was a life history interview (n=13), while wave three was an *ethnographic episode* to enrich the interview accounts (n=10). Fieldwork episodes ranged from around 45 minutes to over 2 hours and 30 minutes. An interpreter was employed when the researcher did not share a common language with participants. Members of women’s networks (partners or parents, n=3) and representatives from local public and third-sector organisations (n=14) were also interviewed.

We recruited participants with the assistance of local community organisations, including those listed on a database of local community food provision, public libraries, and leisure centres. Organisations allowed us to display recruitment flyers and posters, and some advertised the project on their social media. We also posted the recruitment flyer (or equivalent text) on local Facebook groups. Recruitment took place across the city, but was purposely concentrated on areas of higher deprivation. In accordance with the project’s feminist ethic, reference to ‘low-income mothers’ on the recruitment materials was self-defined to avoid stigmatising participants and enabling women to be held as experts in their own lives (Oakley, 1981).

The research team consisted of one white woman (the lead researcher) and one white man, who are both experienced in undertaking qualitative research on sensitive topics. The research team collaboratively designed the ethnographic episodes. Changes to the research team during the project meant that the second researcher was not involved in the primary fieldwork as he joined the project before the third fieldwork wave; instead the lead researcher conducted five *ethnographic episodes* with participants she had not met before. This decision reflected the potential challenges of introducing a new researcher part-way through project fieldwork and the need to maintain continuity as far as possible. In preparation, the lead researcher read the previous interview transcripts in detail to familiarise herself with the families.

As an academic with a southern accent undertaking research in the northern city of Sheffield, the lead researcher’s immediate presence may have affected the narratives and practices that participants shared. Implicit power differences in the research exchange may have surfaced differently across our diverse sample, where some participants were middle-class, University-educated women, others were from traditionally working class backgrounds, and some had migrated to or sought asylum in the UK. Navigating these differences, the researcher’s status as the mother of a school-aged child brought considerable value in providing a relational bridge that facilitated rapport by establishing significant and meaningful shared experiences with participants. This shared experience offered the researcher both a certain level of ‘insider’ access and an appreciation of (some of) the challenges participants faced in feeding their families. The interview transcripts contain many shared discussions of everyday challenges such as preparing an evening meal quickly when everyone is tired, and the frustrations of navigating children’s food preferences.

We documented the *ethnographic episodes* using an audio recorder with two Bluetooth lapel microphones to record both participant and researcher as they moved through space. The researcher made brief notes during fieldwork episodes, using these as the basis for more extensive fieldnotes containing reflections and initial analytical insights. These fieldnotes are part of the project’s data corpus and as such are incorporated into data analysis. The project received ethical approval from the University of Sheffield’s Research Ethics Committee (reference: 055002).

Our Methodological Approach

Our goal was to move beyond verbal descriptions of participants' food practices to engage more deeply with the reality of feeding a family on a low income. At its core, food provisioning is an active, practical task. It involves a range of interwoven social practices and processes including the visible activities of planning, shopping, preparing and serving food, tidying up, and managing waste, alongside the '*invisible occupations*' of advance planning and skillful strategising (Beagan et al., 2018 p.103). It was key to 'see' how participants accomplished these visible tasks, while cultivating an awareness of invisible ones.

Our *ethnographic episodes* drew particularly upon the ideas of 'go-along' interviews, described as '*a more modest, but also a more systematic and outcome-oriented version of 'hanging out' with key informants*' (Kusenbach, 2003, p. 463). In spending a '*slice of ordinary time*' (Kusenbach, 2003, p. 463) with participants, go-along interviews have value in allowing '*for some of the contextual insights of traditional ethnographic methods without the long-term, intense pattern of fieldwork typically associated with ethnography*' (Carpiano, 2009, p. 265). Taking part in shopping trips and engaging with food preparation are forms of 'go-along' in which the researcher accompanies participants during everyday activities to view these situated tasks in practice (Evans, 2012). Mothers chose how they wanted to engage, typically taking part in shopping trips, food preparation ('kitchen episodes'), eating together, or a combination (see Table 2).

As such, our *ethnographic episodes* enabled us to *directly* explore and contextualise the food practices that participants had described in earlier interviews, rather than relying upon verbalised accounts as a proxy for these practices (Evans, 2012; Murcott, 2000)². We aimed to capitalise on the strengths of ethnographic research by paying attention to the temporality of

Table 2. Participants' key Characteristics

Name	Age group at first fieldwork episode	Ethnic background	Family structure ²	Participants present during ethnographic episode ³	Activities
Claudia	30-34	Latin American	Married couple, three children	Claudia, her husband, mum, two secondary school-aged daughters, one primary school-aged daughter	Preparing and eating a meal at home
Margarita	45-49	Latin American	Married couple, two children	Margarita	Baking at home
Kirsty	30-34	White British	Cohabiting couple, two children	Kirsty, preschool-aged daughter	Preparing a meal for her toddler daughter at home
Gabriella	35-39	White British	Lone parent, one child	Gabriella, preschool-aged son	Preparing a meal at home
Tanya	40-44	White British	Lone parent, four children	Tanya, post-16 aged son, secondary school-aged daughter, preschool-aged son	Shopping trip to supermarket then preparing a meal at home
Kim	45-49	White British	Married couple, two children	Kim, primary school-aged son	Preparing and eating a meal at home
Leanne	35-39	White British	Married couple, two children	Leanne and assistance dog in training	Shopping trip to discount retailers and supermarket
Meg	50-55	White British	Lone parent, one child	Meg	Baking and food preparation at home
Nicki	45-49	White British	Cohabiting couple, two children	Nicki	Trip to food redistribution organisation
Rhiannon	40-44	White British	Lone parent, one child	Rhiannon	Shopping trip to supermarket

2. This column refers to the family structure within the 'family home'. Some families had additional, adult children who lived elsewhere.

3. This column lists those who were present at some stage of the ethnographic episode, but not everyone was present throughout. It excludes those who featured only briefly and who did not participate in shopping, food preparation, or eating together.

feeding a family every day³. This temporality had a practical dimension, too, where the confines of a small-scale research project meant that a full ethnographic study would be impractical for both researchers and participants (Pink & Morgan, 2013). When devising this approach, we were mindful of the temptation for methodological innovation for its own sake and sought instead to locate our efforts ‘*within a framework of resolving problems or ambiguities within established methods or designs*’ (Wiles et al., 2011, p. 601).

Other family members were often present when observing mothers’ everyday food practices. In ethnographic research it is not possible for the researcher to anticipate every scenario, and it was not always known in advance whether additional family members would be present. We took a reflexive approach and followed the principle of ‘ethics in practice’ (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004), interpreting the presence of others as implicit agreement to participate. During interview scheduling, both Tanya and Kim requested that their children were actively included in the research exchange. In these instances, the researcher sought written consent from both mother and child⁴, using a simplified information sheet for children, and awarded completion certificates.

Our approach was driven by a feminist ethic of care. While the project’s focus on food provisioning was not in itself sensitive, as often happens in qualitative research, the interviews charted a wide range of sensitive topics, including extreme poverty, violence, relationship breakdown, bereavement, health concerns, and domestic abuse. We were also mindful that entering private caregiving spaces required sensitivity and reflexivity. Accompanying participants on activities that they would typically undertake alone or with close relations demanded genuine openness. Taking time to join participants in their lives – even for a single, short episode – offered a means of demonstrating the researcher’s interest and investment in participants in an ethically sensitive way.

We were also keen to avoid producing observational insights that assumed (or implied) deficits, thereby disrupting narratives that position low-income mothers as ‘other’ or as objects of pity (Power, 2005). Taking seriously our participants’ status as ‘experts’ in navigating their lived experiences was central to our attempts to mitigate assumed power imbalances in ‘researcher-researched’ relationships, and to foreground participants’ comfort over scrutiny (Flaherty & Garratt, 2022). Recognising that our participants may ‘*enact the operations and results of unequal power*’ (Willis & Trondman, 2000, p. 10), we approached their actions as creative responses to structural constraints that showcase resourcefulness and expertise.

The Value of Ethnographic Episodes in Food Research

Our discussion of the value of *ethnographic episodes* focuses on four key strengths of this method: (1) Revealing the practical and care-based entanglements of food provisioning, the complex interdependencies of feeding a family; (2) The impact of skills and constraints on food practices; (3) Going beyond what is said to bring colour to participants’ narratives; and (4) Exploring the relational dynamics of food provisioning.

1. Revealing the Practical and Care-based Entanglements of Food Provisioning

Practical Entanglements

When ‘Food’ Becomes ‘Waste’

Our *ethnographic episodes* richly brought to light the temporalities of everyday practices, in which different food practices are rarely undertaken separately and instead involve the practical entanglements of doing multiple things at once. When spending time with Kirsty and her toddler daughter during her day off from paid work, Kirsty discovered a nearly complete multipack of expired yogurts, removing them from the fridge and throwing them away. Encounters such as these – sometimes lasting just a few seconds – capture ‘*the passage of ‘food’ into ‘waste’*’ (Evans, 2012, p. 44). The thematically structured interview topic guide asked separately about food preparation and responding to food waste, which can perpetuate the false disconnection of intertwined tasks. In contrast, this brief encounter revealed the ‘*entangled elements*’ (Wills et al., 2016, p. 478) of food practices in which Kirsty simultaneously gathered ingredients for her daughter’s lunch while identifying and disposing of ‘waste’ foods.

I Hate Celery, but the Rabbits Will Eat It

A different combination of practical entanglements emerged when accompanying Nicki to a food redistribution organisation. Here, shoppers can purchase a pre-defined quantity and combination of often short-dated food ‘rescued’ from commercial systems for nominal cost. This translates to limited choice and a need to make in-the-moment decisions about which items to

4. Tanya’s secondary school-aged daughter and Kim’s primary school-aged son.

select according to preference and the potential to be eaten while still fresh, or preserved for another time. In this *ethnographic episode*, Nicki played the role of a ‘tour guide’ (Carpiano, 2009, p. 267), immersing the researcher into her ‘‘natural activities’’ (Kusenbach, 2003, p. 459), and the environment they take place within. From her earlier interviews it was clear that avoiding food waste formed a normative, taken for granted, deeply ingrained habitus towards food (Bourdieu, 1990). Observing Nicki’s navigate the practical entanglements of meal planning and shopping demonstrates the value of *ethnographic episodes* in ‘creating bridges’ (Pink & Morgan, 2013, p. 356) between the researcher’s experiences and participants’ habitus and resulting practices. The *ethnographic episode* fostered a deeper appreciation of the challenges and pressures of the practical entanglements Nicki faced. A further layer to these entanglements became apparent when Nicki selected celery for the family’s pet rabbits, demonstrating food provisioning as an act of care encompassing more-than-human relations, alongside the juggling of these practical concerns.

Time was particularly significant, both in offering in-the-moment insights into practical entanglements, and in emphasising its substantive importance. The temporal nature of food practices was experienced as both the pressure on Nicki to choose items quickly to keep the queue moving, and time’s relevance in determining the value of food available. Contrasting with the tendency of interviews to ‘separate participants from their routine experiences and practices’ (Kusenbach, 2003, p. 462), being able to see and experience the food on offer – including browning bananas and potatoes beginning to sprout – revealed the significance of time in a way that would never be captured in the words of interviews alone.

Entanglements of Care

Gifting Her Skills

In her kitchen episode, Margarita showcased the skills she had honed as a pastry chef in her home country when baking a batch of cupcakes. In this episode, baking was less about routine food preparation than the contextual significance of Margarita monetising her food skills within an informal business selling celebration cakes within her social circle. This financed the family’s food bills, enhancing their financial resilience by supplementing low wages – a valuable contribution to the project’s substantive focus on low-income food practices.

Alongside its instrumental value, Margarita’s baking communicated expertise, pride and resilience, revealed when Margarita carefully packaged a gift of cupcakes in small cardboard display boxes for the researcher and interpreter. This moment speaks to White’s (2023) account of the role played by gifts in facilitating connection and care between researchers and participants. Here, care was entangled with the agency and professionalism of Margarita’s baking skills, connecting Margarita to her previous occupation, a vocation she was clearly proud of, as evidenced by photos of her impressive baking creations she showed us on her smartphone. Observing her baking and sharing provided a window into the entanglements of identity, expertise, social networks, and care within Margarita’s food practices. Eating the cakes offered a visceral, tangible appreciation of Margarita’s skill, absent from interview accounts. In this exchange and others, ‘the preparation and consumption of food in the homes of migrant women is a salient example of how seemingly mundane experience can in fact be a performative politics of one’s subjectivity’ (Longhurst et al., 2009, p. 342).

I’m Just Worried About Him Starting School, Because It’s a Big Change

In other kitchen episodes, the everyday intimacy of food practices offered the opportunity to demonstrate care towards participants. The project’s feminist motivation sought to privilege women’s agency as ‘experts’ in navigating their lived experiences while recognising the challenges facing them. As Gabriella prepared a bolognese sauce, she sought reassurance around her son’s upcoming entry into primary school, asking questions about the researcher’s experience of being the mother of a school-aged child that were far removed from the project scope. Recognising there is ‘no intimacy without reciprocity’ (Oakley, 1981, p. 49), using Gabriella’s questions as a prompt for conversation and reassurance presented the opportunity to subvert the ‘hierarchical and instrumental’ power dynamic of the research exchange (Kvale, 2006, p. 485). This nonetheless put the researcher in the uncomfortable position of navigating the multiple identities of researcher and mother (Carroll, 2013), uncertain whether to voice her concerns about how Gabriella’s son – who has additional needs – would experience the transition to school, while not wanting to offer insincere reassurance. This challenge was perhaps magnified by the role reversal entailed by this exchange, which felt exposing for a researcher more accustomed to asking questions than answering them.

Yet, taking Gabriella’s worries seriously fostered empathy and authentic companionship, and, rather than disrupting the boundaries of research encounters (Garrels et al., 2022), offered the means to ‘give something back’ to a participant who had contributed her time to the project. Indeed, Hall (2017) defines feminist research ‘as a form of care work: by listening to and empathising with participants, or in providing companionship or intimacy, one can perform a caring role’ (Hall, 2017, p. 305). Here, simply listening to Gabriella may have been a more significant act of care than the advice offered. *Ethnographic*

episodes enabled the researcher to offer other small, quiet acts of practical care: helping Rhiannon to identify vegetarian pasta sauces in the supermarket, carefully slicing Kim's fresh homemade bread, and listening to and taking seriously Leanne's frustrations around the supermarket's placing of reduced 'yellow-sticker' items. In moments like these, demonstrations of care went beyond words.

2. The Impact of Skills and Constraints on Food Practices

The List on the Wall

During *ethnographic episodes* preparing food with other participants, some practices spoke to the embodied knowledge and skills that guide food preparation, and to how they managed constraints. From her initial two interviews, Meg had revealed herself to be a skillful, passionate, and resourceful cook. Her capabilities contrasted with frustrations at the constraints imposed by her pre-teen son's narrow food preferences, and the everyday management this necessitated. Several participants had discussed the challenges of responding to children's food preferences, yet for Meg, the scale of demands this created was only revealed upon entering her kitchen and seeing a typed list of foods he would eat fixed to the kitchen wall ([Image 1](#)).

Meg's kitchen episode highlighted competing demands between Meg's cooking 'identity' and her son's restrictions. She clearly valued the standing and status that came from being known locally as a competent cook, such as by preparing dishes for an upcoming street party. Against the backdrop of *the list on the wall*, Meg's enthusiastic preparation for the street party appears even more significant. The *ethnographic episode* made palpable the mix of passion and frustration that formed the affective dimension of Meg's relationship with food. It enlivened our data through being faced with the literal lived environments our participants navigate and the constraints within these – here encapsulated by the *list on the wall*.

The ethnographic episodes also enabled the researcher to observe participants' myriad food provisioning skills. Kim articulated her practical, problem-solving skills when explaining how the visual organisation of her fridge suited her

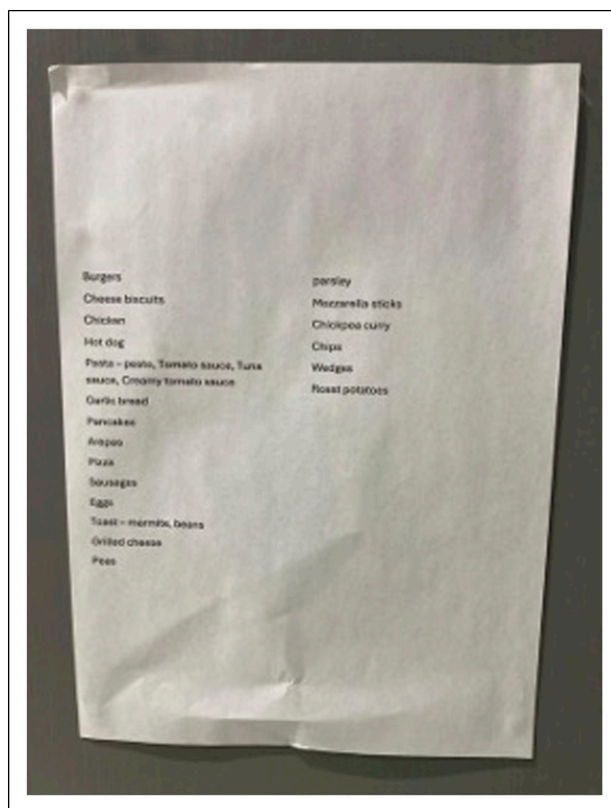


Image 1. List of foods eaten by Meg's son. Image description: Typed list of foods on white printer paper and pinned up in their kitchen. The list reads Burgers; Cheese biscuits; Chicken; Hot dog; Pasta - pesto, Tomato sauce, Tuna sauce, Creamy tomato sauce; Garlic bread; pancakes; Arepas; Pizza; Sausages; eggs; Toast - marmite, beans; Grilled cheese; Peas; parsley; Mozzarella sticks; Chickpea curry; Chips; Wedges; Roast potatoes

neurodivergence. Claudia balanced a wooden spoon on a pot's edge during cooking, avoiding the mess of placing the spoon on a counter and demonstrating practical skill developed through routine preparation. Expertise appeared in a different form in Meg's relaxed approach to preparing chocolate brownies:

'Um so melt the butter and chocolate. It says do it over water but I'll just ignore that because it's quicker in the microwave, isn't it?
[pause] [bowls clatter]'.

Meg's dismissal of recipe instructions demonstrated an embodied confidence that illustrates '*the mundane rituals of foodmaking as sites of knowledge*' (Brady, 2011, p. 322). Meg explained how her confidence to improvise and deviate from formal kitchen practices arose from her upbringing spent in the kitchens of 'post-war grannies.' In each of these exchanges, the *combination* of rich descriptions from in-depth interviews and *ethnographic episodes* offered understandings that go beyond words.

I can't Reach to Open the Window

As well as revealing the constraints on participants' food practices and the skill required to respond to these, *ethnographic episodes* are also capable of eliciting rich details about the spatiality of everyday practices. Nicki had previously complained about her kitchen space, describing it as small and isolated. Yet visiting her home following our shopping trip and seeing the cramped and cluttered space offered '*a richer picture of their reality*' (Bashir, 2018, p. 640). We prepared no food, but the visit brought to light the '*practical, material, and sensorial*' (Daly, 2020, p. 244) aspects of food provision absent from interviewing alone. Beyond the immediate challenges this inadequate space introduced to the task of feeding her family⁵, observing Nicki's kitchen revealed how her everyday material reality constrained her from enacting the more idealised food practices through which she expressed food's central role in her identity and biography. This observation exemplifies what Kusenbach (2003) identifies as the limitation of single methods; observations alone would miss Nicki's motivations, while interviews alone would remove Nicki from the material constraints of her kitchen.

3. Going Beyond What Is Said

The Bottom bit Costs as Much as What [the] top bit did

Our methodological approach re-cast that which '*people would not typically think to talk about*' (Hall et al., 2020, p. 99) into rich observations and articulated reflections enabled by situated practices. The approach is not simply about spotting what is not spoken about: it positions the researcher to actively interpret and make sense of food practices. For example, Claudia prepared fresh tortillas (Image 2), a daily practice that may not have been noteworthy to her – and she did not mention in our interviews – but offered tangible insights into her cultural practices, apparatus, and food skills. Positionality played an important role. Here, the researcher's own food knowledge and broader curiosity meant that verbal explanations were redundant. Instead, food practices could be observed directly and contextualised, allowing for the recognition of embodied skill and an appreciation of cultural knowledge as they were enacted. For example, Claudia placed the tortillas in a pan to fry (Image 3), using her fingers first to flip the tortillas over, then to lift them onto a side plate. As Power 2003, (p.10) reflected, '*participants knew more than they were able to put into words and tell me about their food-related practices*'. The embodied skill and care of Claudia's habitual practice was far more powerful than any verbal description is capable of evoking.

Bringing to life the '*not-yet-verbalised*' (Joosse & Marshall, 2020, p. 608) was similarly evident when Tanya rinsed out a nearly empty jar of sauce before adding the water to a Bolognese sauce. This action led to a short conversation, where questions from her children prompted Tanya to explain, '*My great grandma, she always used to say, 'the bottom bit costs as much as what [the] top bit did''*'. This exchange illustrates how food practices act as '*association objects*' (Joosse & Marshall, 2020, citing Harper, 2002, p. 612) and '*dialogical tools*' (ibid, citing Gibbon et al., 2004, p. 62) that support '*the participant's thinking and narrative*' and facilitate '*the conversation between researcher and participant*' (Ibid, p. 612). The home and everyday environments provided a particularly rich setting for interacting with such objects and tools. Tanya's explanation emerged from the practice and surrounding conversation, triggering a memory. While interview data are generated from the researcher's inquiries, which might undermine authenticity, *ethnographic episodes* are rooted within the complex web of everyday food practices, offering an organic and holistic view of participants' lived experiences.

5. Nicki's male partner did not cook, except if Nicki was unavailable.



Image 2. Tortilla press used by Claudia. Image description: Open tortilla press, ready to receive small balls of tortilla dough. A large ball of dough sits inside a clear plastic mixing bowl. There is a large container of salt on the kitchen counter, alongside a wooden spoon and green dishcloth

Ethnographic episodes did nonetheless have value in facilitating contextually-informed questions from the researcher, although these have to be thoughtfully navigated (see *Being an outsider* below). For instance, when Claudia began to wash meat with water and lemon juice, the researcher asked the interpreter to probe this (*'can you ask what the lemon's for?'*), the response being *'to disinfect, to clean it up'* due to flies at the butcher's stall. The natural opportunity for enquiry afforded by *ethnographic episodes* and the granular food knowledge, skills, and attitudes this revealed were unlikely to be uncovered in traditional interviews. Crucially, the method brings into focus additional forms of embedded and embodied knowledge that



Image 3. Tortillas frying in Claudia's kitchen. Image description: Four tortillas frying in a large, flat pan on a gas stove

shape food practices – the influence of intergenerational knowledge and family memory in Tanya’s avoidance of food waste, and ways for Claudia to ‘make do’ in response to local food availability, conditions, and safety concerns.

Claudia and the Spoon

In our project, the opportunity afforded by *ethnographic episodes* for ‘de-centering the text’ (Power, 2003, p. 9) and ‘going beyond what is said’ had perhaps the greatest value – both methodologically and substantively – when the researcher did not share a common language with participants. Methodologically, the affective experiences of sight, smell, and taste naturally disrupted the primacy of verbal understandings in qualitative research. Indeed, ‘the inclusion of non-linguistic dimensions in research, which rely on other expressive possibilities, may allow us to access and represent different levels of experience’ (Bagnoli, 2009, p. 547). Offering an example, alongside the meat and vegetable soup she was cooking for her family, Claudia also prepared a vegetarian version to accommodate the researcher’s food preferences. While cooking she located a wooden spoon and held it up to show the researcher that she was using this spoon to stir the vegetarian soup. Lasting just a couple of seconds, this ‘unspoken element’ (Pink & Morgan, 2013, p. 353) served multiple purposes: it displayed Claudia’s knowledge around avoiding cross contamination, communicated Claudia’s intent that the researcher noticed this practice, and showed reassuring attentiveness to care and rapport through safe kitchen practices (see *Entanglements of Care* above). Gauntlett (2007) emphasised how visual methods are able to elicit understandings that cannot be expressed verbally. Our *ethnographic episodes* suggest a revised reading of Gauntlett, in which observations offered understandings that did not need to be expressed verbally, whether or not the researcher and participant share a common language. In this instance, the interpreter was superfluous to requirements. The care expressed in a visualised gesture needs no translation; we had moved beyond words.

4. Exploring Relational Dynamics

Including other family members in our *ethnographic episodes* revealed complex relational dynamics within which everyday food practices are entangled. Research on language and interaction in domestic settings has long recognised mealtimes as sites where identities, relationships, and values are actively negotiated through talk (Blum-Kulka, 1997; Ochs & Shohet, 2006; Tannen et al., 2007). More recent work demonstrates how morality and relationality are multimodally constituted, drawing embodiment into analytical attention (Caronia & Colla, 2024; Galatolo & Caronia, 2018). Our *ethnographic episodes* likewise attend to embodied and relational dimensions, incorporating but exceeding the verbal, during food practices more broadly conceived. While interviews provided detailed accounts of family responsibilities around providing food, the opportunity to observe these relationships revealed layers of meaning that our interviews could not access. The approach gave purchase on the ‘real-time’ negotiations, care practices, and the efforts to maintain emotional evenness that affected the ‘doing’ of family food practices.

Pull out the Tongue

Tanya’s first two interviews painted a picture of an overstretched lone mother of four children who gained little pleasure from food (*‘Food’s food at end o’ t day, goes down [the] same hole*) but still prioritised normative aspects of food practices: eating together, instilling table manners, and no phones during meals. Yet the routine act of preparing for a shopping trip between Tanya and her preschool-aged son brought to light a more positive and playful choreography within parent-child interaction in which Tanya balanced the need for a swift exit to the shops, alongside teaching her child how to put on his shoes. When her son initially placed his shoes on the wrong feet, she corrected him kindly, instructing him to ‘pull out the tongue’ of his shoe – to which he responded by sticking out his own tongue. For effect, he repeated the performance for the second shoe. Here, Tanya transformed what could have been a minor frustration into an opportunity for shared fun and connection. This exchange brought to light the subtle, moment-by-moment negotiation of care within the time management of food provisioning – insights that retrospective accounts in interviews rarely access.

Don’t Lick the Spoon That you’re Cooking With, Darling

Kim’s kitchen episode, in which she taught her primary-school aged son to cook, similarly exemplified cooking instruction as more than the simple transfer of skills but as an intrinsically relational practice. Food plays a prominent role in assessments of ‘good mothering’, and a form of intensive mothering was evident in this episode (Ennis, 2014). In her first two interviews, Kim had previously articulated concerns about the financial challenges she expected her three neurodivergent sons to face in adulthood. For Kim, teaching her sons to cook was a politically-motivated act of building resilience in her children, and her *ethnographic episode* further unearthed a performative element to these activities, where Kim’s presentation of self was only evident through direct observation.

Kim's *ethnographic episode* further revealed the intensity and complexity of her goal. When her son dropped a mushroom into an open kitchen drawer rather than in a pan, Kim's response was one of patient kindness, remarking that the mushroom had gone to 'an imaginative place'. In reframing in neutral terms what might otherwise have been seen as a mistake, Kim nurtured her son's resilience and sustained his engagement in the task by keeping the mood even. As a mother, the researcher was well acquainted with the challenges of maintaining an even mood when engaging with children, especially when confronted with the frustrations of small errors like the lost mushroom. Observing the intensity of additional emotional labour Kim deployed to respond calmly to her son's occasional yet intense outbursts offered a more vivid and demanding picture of Kim's reality when seeking to develop her son's practical and wider skills than the interview data could suggest. In this exchange, the researcher's positionality helped bring into focus the contrast between different children and the strength and patience Kim displayed when supporting her son both in the immediate task and for his future independent life. Kim's *ethnographic episode* illustrates entanglements between the material and emotional dimensions of food provisioning (Devault, 1991) that did not escape articulation, but where verbal description was inadequate.

Identifying and Responding to Challenges in Ethnographic Episodes

Being an Outsider in an Insider's Space

The looser format of *ethnographic episodes*, unconstrained by standard interview conventions or topic guides, brought substantial opportunities to enliven the interview data. However, stepping outside the 'typical' researcher role also brought challenges, requiring emotional labour to maintain an alternative researcher identity, spanning insider and outsider positionalities.

The everyday nature of the *ethnographic episodes* – kitchen episodes in particular – offered entry into participants' backstage areas and practices (Goffman, 1959) that would normally be reserved for 'insiders'. Despite occupying intimate spaces not normally accessed by a stranger, this did not grant the researcher the 'insider' role of friend or family member. The researcher remained an 'outsider', where offering suggestions during food practices would not be acceptable. In navigating these conflicting roles, the researcher did not pursue 'intensive excursions' (Pink & Morgan, 2013, p. 352) that enabled researchers to ask more probing questions. Instead, she avoided asking direct questions about participants' food practices lest she appear interrogatory or judgemental. Asking Tanya why she bought more expensive ready-grated cheese, for instance, would have likely disrupted the 'naturalistic' flow of the shopping trip, despite the question's relevance to the research objectives. In an interview setting, participants are *expecting* to be questioned, while *ethnographic episodes* offer participants fewer opportunities to cultivate more socially desirable outcomes if they wish, making it important to exercise caution when seeking to ask direct questions.

Some circumstances offer more fertile ground for asking questions. Rhiannon's comment towards the end of a shopping trip: 'And I've got everything on my list. So, that's good' enabled the researcher to respond conversationally with 'How many things have you got that aren't on the list?'. Likewise, asking Claudia why she was rinsing meat with lemon water was perhaps easier because the project interpreter delivered this question. Overt cultural differences in food practices further enabled the less confrontational 'naive researcher' identity (Gokah, 2006). There will always be trade-offs here. To avoid oversteering episodes or jeopardising relationships, researchers must remain attentive to questioning opportunities that arise while letting others pass. When living between these two identities, some topics inevitably escape scrutiny.

These challenges of enacting a suitable identity highlight the emotional labour and occasional discomfort required within *ethnographic episodes* (Blakely, 2007; Collins & Cooper, 2014). Managing loud and unexpected outbursts from Kim's neurodivergent son struggling with his environment, and eating unfamiliar foods with Claudia's entire family as the only person unable to speak the common language, was both emotionally and physically draining. Maintaining an 'outsider' identity within these 'insider' spaces, while sustaining concentration and openness in unfamiliar social circumstances, was at times wearing. However, O'Reilly (2012) emphasises how feeling uncomfortable is the nature of ethnographic research, not something to resolve. Moreover, experiencing these everyday discomforts offered a richer and more profound appreciation of participants' everyday lives and the emotional labour embedded in food practices, in a way that could only be accessed by being there in person.

Authenticity and Reactivity in the Research Exchange

A challenge in using *ethnographic episodes* concerns authenticity and reactivity, and potential changes to participants' 'real' everyday behaviours prompted by the researcher's presence. It is certainly possible that participants offered rehearsed or partial accounts, through deliberate curation or pretence, or the structural limitations inherent in single-episode observation. Compared with longer-term ethnographic research, our episodes offer an inevitably partial

glimpse into everyday food practices. Chaotic routines, moments of stress, and longer-term strategies may remain unseen. Participants' availability is structured by work, caring, and other responsibilities (Carpiano, 2009). Researchers are consequently constrained to observe activities that fit into the time remaining: one meal, one shopping trip, or one kitchen scene. For instance, Gabriella's carefully planned kitchen episode, during which her sister was present to mind her preschool-aged son, structured the practices. Had the researcher been present during the pre-dinner rush without childcare support, different forms of practice could have emerged. Similarly, Margarita's request that the researcher and translator wait in a separate room while she set up her kitchen ready for the *ethnographic episode* exemplifies the method as a 'staged observation' (Joosse & Marshall, 2020, p. 618). In taking the more ethical option of scheduling the *ethnographic episodes* around participants' lives, we were unavoidably attending to straightforward rather than challenging provisioning instances.

To ameliorate these potential issues, these episodes were completed as the last stage of fieldwork, where participants had already been interviewed twice. As noted, changes to the research team during the project meant that the lead researcher conducted *ethnographic episodes* with five participants she had not met before. Participants' agreement to take part in the final fieldwork wave, even with an unfamiliar researcher, suggested that they were comfortable with the researcher's presence. The length of the episodes – up to 2.5 hours – ultimately made it unlikely that participants could maintain any elaborate pretence, constructed for the benefit of the researcher (Zahle, 2023). Indeed, challenging moments suggest we did authentically access family food practices: Kirsty's preschool-aged daughter dropping her plate of food, Tanya and her daughter bickering over their shopping list, and Kim's exasperation over her son's poor food hygiene. Moreover, the researcher's comfort interacting with participants, even in the role of silent observer, made it less likely that their presence 'ruptured the tacit nature of the practice being performed' (Wills et al., 2016, p. 477).

It is also useful to move beyond treating reactivity and the inherent constraints of the method as potential sources of 'failure'. Engaging with these issues as productive analytical opportunities entails approaching methods as inevitably performative, and taking seriously how they 'bring into being what they discover' (Law & Urry, 2004, p. 393). Our *ethnographic episodes* were never going to access some hidden, unaffected 'reality'. Indeed, no method is ever capable of doing so. Accepting the researcher's role as 'one point of the relations within an assemblage' (Coleman & Ringrose, 2013, p. 6) means acknowledging their presence as shaping the forms of interaction that became possible. In this light, Margarita's 'staging' of her kitchen episode reveals what she valued presenting within the encounter, and the conditions she deemed necessary for meaningful participation. Whether or not this preparation influenced her actual cooking behaviour is beside the point. Rather than being an artificial performance, this moment reveals how food practices draw upon social resources to create the conditions for focused attention, skill demonstration and, ultimately, getting the job done. The staging illuminates Margarita's capacity to marshal resources when circumstances permit. Importantly, it also points to factors that might have otherwise impinged upon this possibility – and did feature in other *ethnographic episodes* – competing demands for attention, time pressures, or chaotic kitchen spaces.

Practical Considerations When Planning and Undertaking Ethnographic Episodes

A number of practical considerations arise when planning *ethnographic episodes*, principally timing, transcription, and equipment. First, the method's major resource is time. The kitchen episodes and shopping trips took 1.5 to 2.5 hours, potentially longer than traditional interviews, and with less opportunity to hurry the exchange along if time is tight. While this extended engagement yields vibrant data and unanticipated insights, the data are in some ways more dilute. We suggest that this perception reflects the fundamentally different nature of ethnographic data, where understanding derives from the researcher sustaining a presence, immersing themselves in the flow of social practice, rather than through questioning. It is here that valuable insights arise.

We nonetheless recognise that the time-pressured realities of contemporary academia mean researchers may need to be strategic in how they deploy such a valuable method. As already noted, *ethnographic episodes* were used in latter fieldwork waves, once familiarity and rapport had been established. The existing interview data proved effective in steering what to focus on, and in contextualising our observations (Kusenbach, 2003).

Second, the presence of multiple speakers – participants alongside family members, children and sometimes pets – creates complex transcription demands that can significantly increase both time and costs. Discussions were sometimes compromised by interfering kitchen ambience, overlapping conversations, or the 'slap-slap' of chewing noises. These raw audio files could therefore prove difficult to navigate meaningfully, especially for other team members. We deployed analytical flexibility, allowing the form of the data to guide transcription decisions rather than considering transcription the default. We

deemed some *ethnographic episodes* unsuitable for transcription, in these instances drawing solely upon observation notes detailing practices, contextual details, and fieldwork notes⁶. Producing comprehensive contextual notes in which background noises are explained with reference to the food practice taking place inevitably requires additional time investment, but significantly enhances data accessibility for the research team, and supports future analysis.

Third, most practically of all, *ethnographic episodes* require high-quality audio-recording equipment capable of recording two or more speakers as they move about a kitchen or shop, where background noise is likely. Such items are necessarily more expensive than standard models; fortunately we had access to an institutional audio recorder with two bluetooth lapel microphones, although technical issues meant that a small number of episodes were not audio recorded and we had to rely solely on fieldwork notes. While heeding Back's (2010) warnings about over-dependence on devices as faithful capturers of social 'reality', this equipment allowed us to broaden our ethnographic attention. When there was much to see and listen to, the equipment recorded the nuanced exchanges and overlapping conversations, enabling us to focus on observing spaces, material practices, and interactions that Back (2010) argues we might miss if overly focused on voice capture. Technology thus supported the generation of ethnographic insights.

Conclusions

This article has explored the value of *ethnographic episodes* as a methodological approach, enriching qualitative research on everyday food practices. Our reflections are by no means exhaustive; this article aims to contribute to ongoing conversations about the qualities of different qualitative methods. We have argued that *ethnographic episodes* have value in revealing the entanglements of food provisioning, highlighting the impact of skills and constraints on food practices, moving beyond 'what is said', and offering insights into the relational dynamics of food provisioning. These features can produce vivid contextualised accounts of lived experience, layering attention to sensemaking alongside participants' verbal accounts. In foregrounding the *ethnographic episodes* themselves, we acknowledge that this article has engaged less with the process or challenges of 'end of project' formal analysis. We welcome accounts from other researchers working in this space to share their wisdom.

Our contribution provides empirical evidence of how our *ethnographic episodes* add richness to interview data, challenging assumptions that only extended time and constant researcher presence can produce meaningful insights. Instead, ethnographic insights can be achieved within time-bounded and strategically deployed episodes that respect participant availability. The approach is adaptable to resource-limited circumstances while maintaining methodological rigour. We also offer an open account of the challenges of applying this approach, reflecting on questions of authenticity and emotional labour of ethnographic research, and offering pragmatic ways to ameliorate these issues. Finally, we provide practical guidance for researchers seeking to deploy this method in their own projects.

We emphasise that these *ethnographic episodes* enabled us to see activities we had previously only heard described (Murcott, 2000), providing crucial insights that generated '*the coming together of a multitude of pieces into one grand (yet simultaneously mundane) performance*' (Wills et al., 2016, p. 471). Traditional interview techniques remain valuable, an essential part of the insights gained through our study, and researchers '*reject that common qualitative interview at their peril*' (Hitchings, 2012, p.66). Indeed, we heed Stacey's (1988) warning that ethnographic research must be '*rigorously self-aware and therefore humble about the partiality of its ethnographic vision and its capacity to represent self and other*' (p. 26).

Nonetheless, incorporating ethnographic approaches into research design pays off substantially. This method aligns well with feminist research commitments to valuing neglected forms of knowledge. The combination of food provisioning, care work, and navigation of financial constraint represents complex everyday practices that resist straightforward articulation. Our participants deployed sophisticated forms of practice and embodied knowledge that might escape memory or attention in an interview. By fusing observations with qualitative interviewing, the approach '*simultaneously takes advantage of each method's strengths, while employing both to compensate for each other's limitations*' (Carpiano, 2009, p. 265), attending to the discursive and practical dimensions of everyday food practices. These timebound, snapshot episodes produced remarkably rich data, with pages of fieldwork notes accompanying simple food provisioning or preparation tasks. They allow researchers to '*participate in everyday lives without intruding too far into the respondents' homes and private worlds*' (Evans, 2012, p. 44). In this way, extended ethnographic insights are appropriate to the practical constraints of contemporary research contexts, while respecting the time and resource limitations that low-income mothers work with every day.

Finally, we note the method's applicability well beyond research into food practices. Investigations into wide-ranging everyday practices could benefit from this approach. As indicated, it is a 'good-value' way of incorporating an ethnographic sensibility within manageable bite-sized chunks. However, we also suggest that food practices themselves offer particularly valuable contextual

6. The audio files were nonetheless valuable for checking quotes and other details.

insights for research across diverse topics. Food provisioning is interrelated with many important aspects of everyday life, from relationships, health, identity, economics, to temporality; undertaking *ethnographic episodes* focused on food practices could therefore illuminate broader patterns of lived experience, even when food is not the primary research focus.

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Ethical Considerations

The project received ethical approval from the University of Sheffield's Research Ethics Committee (reference: 055002) on 14 March 2024.

Consent to Participate

Prior to enrolment in the study, all participants provided written informed consent to conduct the study and publish the anonymised findings. This included two school-aged children who actively engaged in food preparation tasks during the ethnographic episodes. Other family members entered some episodes and took part in shopping trips or eating together. Informed consent was not explicitly sought from these participants and no data from these interactions was included in the analysis.

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Data Availability Statement

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as the project is still ongoing. The project data will be deposited in the UK Data Archive following the end of the project.

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