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## Reconceptualising 'masculinity' through men's contributions to domestic foodwork

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## Reconceptualising ‘masculinity’ through men’s contributions to domestic foodwork

Definition of **masculinity**: [*mass noun*] possession of the qualities traditionally associated with men (Oxford Dictionaries 2013)

As this dictionary definition suggests, ‘masculinity’ has conventionally been conceptualised in terms of traits or qualities perceived to be associated with men and, therefore, in binary opposition to those associated with women and ‘femininity’. Typically ‘masculine’ qualities might include virility, strength, robustness; men were formerly hunters, protectors, providers, while women were gatherers, carers and servers; men are ‘rational’, women are ‘emotional’. Men occupy the public world of work, while the domestic is women’s domain. While masculinity and femininity are clearly relational, implicating relations of privilege and power, scholarship on gender has highlighted that power is not something that is either experienced or practiced by all women or all men in the same way, but rather that male domination is a ‘dynamic system constantly reproduced and reconstituted through gender relations under changing conditions, including resistance by subordinate groups’ (Carrigan et al. 1985: 598). Indeed, in their rethink of hegemonic masculinity, Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) suggest that dominant masculinities take on different forms in different cultures, spaces and time and are not necessarily oppressive.

A generation ago it was possible to clearly distinguish particular roles, responsibilities or spaces within the home as either ‘feminine’ or ‘masculine’, but the boundaries between these distinctions have become increasingly blurred in recent years as the ‘standardised biographies’ that once traced our progression through life have been dismantled (Giddens 1992). As an outcome of changing social mores, economic factors and an ageing population, there has been an emergence of more diverse family forms, resulting in an increase in the number of reconstituted families, solo living, and extended periods of house-sharing (Smart & Neale 1999; Sellaeg and Chapman 2008; Allan et al. 2011). Consequently, in the UK, the ‘nuclear’ household with two parents and their dependent children living under the same roof is no longer the statistical norm and domestic roles have consequently required reconceptualization (Jackson 2009). At the same time, however, individuals’ engagement with physical and emotional spaces outside the home has also facilitated a reconstitution of people’s relationship to activities which take place within it (Meah and Jackson 2012). Indeed, where once the strongly demarcated spatial structures of work and home were regarded as perpetuating power and gender imbalances (Smith and Winchester 1998, 328), the changing nature of paid work – marked both in terms of a decline in manufacturing in the global North, and women’s increased labour market participation – have provided fertile conditions for the reconceptualisation of gender-based subjectivities, witnessed most markedly through a blurring of the male ‘breadwinner’/female ‘housewife’ model (Meah, under revision).

Time-use data from the UK would appear to indicate a shift in the gendered distribution of household tasks, Kan et al. (2011) reporting that men’s total domestic work time has increased from 90 minutes per day in the 1960s to 148 minutes per day in the early 2000s, with time spent on cooking, cleaning and laundry increasing from around 20 minutes per day to more than 50 minutes per day over the same period (see also Bianchi et al. 2000 reporting on the US). Some scholars have interpreted these findings as a cause for optimism, while others argue that, regardless of shifts in the ideologies surrounding women and men’s domestic roles and responsibilities, men’s failure to fill

the shortfall in household labour wrought by women's participation in waged work outside the home suggests that there is little evidence of *actual* change (McMahon 1999; Singleton and Maher 2004; Segal 2007). Indeed, within my own study of gender and foodwork in the UK<sup>1</sup>, there was little evidence of any significant transformation in gender roles and relations amounting to a 'democratisation' of domesticity (Meah and Jackson 2013). Debates about the 'oppressive' character of the home and the gendered power dynamics within it are well-worn and, elsewhere, (Meah, under revision) I have made an attempt to 'unsettle' the resounding Anglo-American feminist refrain of female domestic oppression. In this chapter, my aim is to move away from the gendered myopia that has tended to characterise much Anglo-American scholarship on food by focussing specifically on men. Indeed, although perceptions about what is and is not strictly 'women's work' might be shifting (Swenson 2009), Julier and Lindenfeld (2005) highlight that there have been very few academic analyses of how ideologies surrounding women, men and food are changing, and – until recently – there has been a 'lack of research based on men's own accounts of involvement in 'foodwork'' (Metcalf et al. 2009, 95). Rather than reporting who is doing what, why and with what frequency, my concern is with examining how participation in the kitchen is experienced by some of the men who took part in my study of domestic foodwork practices, exploring the meanings that these practices might have in the wider context of their everyday lives and the implications regarding masculine subjectivities. By exploring what men and women are seen to do via *observed practice*, my aim is to contest the either-or-ness suggested by the terms 'masculinity' and 'femininity', highlighting that gendered practice is more fractured and nuanced than currently allowed by these categorisations.

### **Performing gendered subjectivities within 'slippery' spatial boundaries**

The idea that 'masculinity' and 'femininity' are not fixed or monolithic categories is not a new one. Indeed, academic scholarship has increasingly emphasised the multiple, fluid, dynamic and contested nature of *masculinities* and *femininities* (Connell 1987; 1985), constituting a process of 'endless becoming' (Nilan 1995). Feminist geographers have been among those contributing to developing a more nuanced understanding of the operationalization of power in the different spaces occupied by women and men - for example, work, home, leisure - highlighting the role of place in processes of identification (see Valentine 1993; McDowell 1999, Browne 2004, van Hoven and Hörschelmann 2005, Johnston and Longhurst 2010), as well as the slippage which may occur between masculine and feminine subjectivities as individuals move between these spaces<sup>2</sup>. Indeed, as Gillian Rose (1995, 546) reminds us, 'not even sexed difference should be taken for granted' since subjectivities are spatially embodied. Linda McDowell's (1997) work on bankers, for example, pertinently challenges the codification of certain types of jobs as exclusively 'masculine' preserves with little or no slippage between the different spaces occupied by men and women and related identities required therein. McDowell highlights the metaphor of performance, and of masquerade, in her interviews with male and female bankers (1997, 161), her analysis drawing upon Judith

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<sup>1</sup> This research was part of an international programme of research on 'Consumer Culture in an Age of Anxiety' (CONANX) funded by an Advanced Investigator Grant awarded to Peter Jackson by the European Research Council (ERC-2008-AdG-230287-CONANX).

<sup>2</sup> See also Robinson and Hockey 2011 for a sociological account of performances of masculine identities as men move across public and private spaces

Butler's (1990 and 1993) theorisation of the social construction of gender as embodied performance, making possible transgressive and spatially specific performances. Developing Butler's arguments further, Gregson and Rose (2000) suggest that the instability and slippage evident between performances and the spaces in which these take place point toward potential for both subversion and disruption, as well as highlighting a much more complex and messy relationship between power, different spaces and the (gendered) performance(s) which take place therein. For these authors, the emphasis is with exploring the *relationality* of performance and how the blurring of clear distinctions between positions and spaces is a source of performative instability (pp. 442-43).

This way of rethinking the practices which take place within the kitchen, and a blurring of its boundaries with other seemingly unrelated spaces, is a useful conceptual tool for re-examining the negotiation and performance of masculine subjectivities as men move within the domestic environment and beyond. Indeed, as Alison Blunt (2005, 510) has pointed out, 'the home itself is intensely political, both in its internal intimacies and through its interfaces with the wider world'.

Over the last decade or so I have spoken with dozens of people (admittedly largely women) about 'family' practices, including gendered emotional and domestic distributions of labour (see Robinson et al. 2004; Hockey et al. 2007; Meah and Watson 2011; Meah and Jackson 2013; Meah and Watson in press). Data from generations aged 60+ point toward the persistence of a traditional division of the domestic into 'masculine' (outside) and 'feminine' (inside) domains (see Cameron 1998). Indeed, in the UK there exists a stereotype of the man who takes pride in his shed, his garage, his workshop, where everything has its place, who will service the household's cars, check the tyre pressures, and religiously wash, wax and polish, activities which his female counterpart may be ill-equipped, or disinclined, to do. Consciously or otherwise, gendered subjectivities are invoked as clothes are ironed and alloys are polished. Reporting shifts in the domestic participation of a group of Norwegian men over a 15 year period, Helene Aarseth (2009, 430) indicates the persistence – at least until the 1990s – of gendered discourses in the articulation of certain tasks as more 'naturally' undertaken by women than men. One participant, for example, is reported as suggesting that cleaning and dusting are not activities that he felt he had a 'gut-feeling for', whereas his wife did. However, fifteen years after his initial interview, it appeared that responsibility for cleaning the house was distributed among all members of the household, with tasks regarded as gender-neutral. For commentators such as Andrew Gorman-Murray (2008, 369), such reports are evidence of a shifting relationship between masculinity and domesticity, at least ideologically pointing toward both the way in which ideals of home and changing homemaking practices have (re)figured masculine identities, and also how men's changing enactments of domesticity can refashion dominant discourses of home.

Within this chapter, I want to explore the ways in which changing homemaking practices are contributing toward refiguring masculine identities. I do so by specifically focussing on foodwork, understood here as referring to all aspects of planning, provisioning and clearing up, as well as the activity of cooking. My discussions draw upon data collected via a multigenerational household study undertaken largely in the South Yorkshire and Derbyshire areas of the UK between February 2010 and August 2011. Combining both qualitative and ethnographic methods in the form of provisioning go-alongs (Kusenbach 2003), videoed meal preparation and generally 'hanging out' (Evans 2012) in participants' kitchens, I spoke with 23 members of eight extended families (17 households), aged between 17 and 92. Seven of the participants were men. Three were responsible

for everyday cooking in their relationships, while a fourth had increasingly taken on responsibility for cooking as he approached retirement, while his wife continued to work. One lived alone, while another in an all-male house-share. Only one man did not routinely involve himself in any of the routine foodwork in his household. All but one of the men are White British, the other was a British-born Pakistani; and households represented a largely middle-class constituency, although social mobility was evident in the older generations in particular. Additionally, I also undertook a series of focus groups<sup>3</sup> which were more socially and ethnically diverse. While the 'sample' is small, and findings cannot, therefore, be extrapolated across a general population, participants were observed in detail as they interacted with food, family members and various retailers. By accessing the wider social context in which men's foodwork practices took place, this enables us to begin move beyond masculinity as ideology (relying exclusively on reported behaviour), to understanding masculinity in relational practice.

### Unsettling the gendered geography of domestic kitchens

Foodwork occupies a peculiar position within domestic activities. Although the kitchen is generally regarded as 'women's domain', there is ample evidence to suggest that men have, historically, been involved in various aspects of foodwork. In many pastoral societies in the global South, for example, men are responsible for activities which take place *outside* of the kitchen, including killing animals and butchering domestic meat, as well as roasting meat in fields, forests and other open spaces (see Goody 1982; Holtzman 2002). Of course, one doesn't have to look so far to find evidence of men's involvement in particularly 'masculine' forms of foodwork. Adler (1981: 46), for example, reports that although occasional domestic cooking by men can be dated back to the mid-nineteenth century, the repertoire of male cooking is believed to have expanded in response to the popularity of outdoor barbeques following the Second World War. Men, he suggests, demonstrate a predilection toward outdoors and open-fire cooking which invoke memories of campfire cooking in boyhood, an observation also echoed by Aarseth (2009) in relation to Norwegian men who enjoy cooking as an extension of their interest in outdoor activities such as hiking, hunting and fishing. Inness' (2001, 17) observations regarding US men's cookbooks dating to the 1950s indicates that 'Men and Cooking' is not the oxymoron that it might initially appear. Indeed, she suggests that although American boys were 'instructed at an early age that their masculinity was imperilled in the most feminine of home environments: the kitchen' (2001: 39), as an antidote to this, a 'male cooking mystique' was created within men's cooking literature which would reinforce their sense of masculinity and reassure them that 'a trip to the kitchen wouldn't feminise them' (ibid, 18)<sup>4</sup>. Conversely, however, Jay Mechling (2005) has pointed out the paradox that the American Boy Scouts movement apparently endorsed the philosophy that teaching boys cooking skills and an ethic of *caring* for others – usually a 'feminine' preserve - could actually *enhance* their masculinity. He writes:

From a feminist perspective, boys' everyday experiences with cooking and eating are formative in the boys' understanding of caring and being cared for, of serving and being

<sup>3</sup> Thirty-seven participants aged 23-89 contributed to the seven focus groups. These included 13 men.

<sup>4</sup> The Male Cooking Mystique encouraged men to resist women's attempts to force their preference for 'fluffy frippery' on them, by insisting on cooking and eating foods associated with 'masculinity and manliness' (Inness 2001: 18-19) (see also Roos et al. 2001; Sobal 2005), namely meat, preferably grilled or barbecued.

served, and therefore, of naturalized patterns of gender dominance and submission. Yet, under certain circumstances, boys can be urged by men and other boys to cook and serve, to nurture others, without surrendering male privilege (2005, 69).

Clearly, foodwork cannot be distinguished from gendered stereotypes and subjectivities. As Deutsch (2005) and Swenson (2009) have noted, the proliferation of food-related cooking programmes in the US, in particular, has inspired some men to become more than just recreational ‘burgermeisters’ (Deutsch 2005: 92), while the conventions employed by broadcasters simultaneously uphold existing gender binaries: men’s cooking is competitive or leisurely, while women’s cooking remains domestic work (Swenson 2009: 42)<sup>5</sup>. Coterminous with the advent of consumer-based living and the explosion in popularity of cookery programmes and the cookbook genre, cooking is increasingly emerging as a recreational, leisure activity (Roos et al. 2001; Holden 2005; Short 2006; Brownlie and Hewer 2007; Aarseth 2009; Swenson 2009; Cairns et al. 2010). Indeed it has been demystified – by the likes of Jamie Oliver – and reconstituted as a ‘cool’, masculine lifestyle activity (see Hollows 2003; Brownlie and Hewer 2007), a claim which is unlikely to be made of doing the laundry or cleaning the toilet<sup>6</sup>.

These ideas had currency within some of my focus group discussions. Here, women in their 40s discuss the role of television in transforming the character of cooking, highlighting, as Swenson (2009, 47) observes, that it has been instrumental in invoking a sense of ‘masculine domesticity’ which has given men a culturally approved place at the stove:

*Marie*<sup>7</sup>: *But [TV chefs] have made cooking cool as well. It used to be seen as,*

*Louise*: *A drudge.*

*Marie*: *A drudge, women’s work, something like that. Now that it’s the blokes doing it, and it seems quite cool, but when,*

*AM*: *Do any of your husbands cook?*

*Louise*: *Yeah, mine does, very, very good cook. Well I cook ‘cause I have to and I don’t particularly enjoy it, but I do, I cook it, I don’t buy pre-packed things but Tim cooks at weekends, and he loves it and he’s really good.*

*Louise*: *For me it’s a drudge, I’ve got the kids, you’ve got work, you’ve got this, you’ve got that, I just, I just don’t enjoy it, full stop.*

*Helen*: *I enjoy it if I’ve got time.*

These women draw upon a vocabulary of duty, responsibility and obligation in speaking about their relationship with cooking which is contrasted with the image of Jamie Oliver, who has made cooking

<sup>5</sup> See also Holden, 2005, writing about representations of masculinity in Japanese food programming.

<sup>6</sup> Exceptionally, William Beer (1983) has compared housework with ‘adventure’, invoking a traditionally masculine form of identification in approaching housework as ‘unexplored territory’, not unlike Everest. Likewise, Sarah Pink (2004) reports that some of her Spanish informants suggested that their engagement in housework was no less performative of their masculinity as other activities, and reflective of a specifically ‘meticulous’ masculine identity. Stephen Atherton (2009) reports that such meticulous attention to detail is also characteristic of the domestic discipline demanded of the barrack environment in the British Army, where ‘men are deeply immersed into domestic routines that are constructed as feminine’ (Hockey 1986). However, these male-dominated and rigidly disciplined artificial constructs of ‘home’ are unlikely to bear any resemblance to traditional domestic life and are often rejected outside in civilian spaces.

<sup>7</sup> All names are pseudonyms.

'cool', and Louise's husband – a weekend cook – reinforcing long-standing arguments that men's cooking is festal (Adler 1981), or undertaken mostly out of choice, rather than through a sense of duty and obligation (Swinbank 2002; Meah and Jackson 2013). That said, however, the only male participant in this group, 79-yr old Jim, reports that "*I don't get the chance*" to cook because it's his wife who is always cooking; "*if I was left on my own, I should be able to cook*"<sup>8</sup>.

### **Enacting masculine subjectivities across blurred spatial boundaries**

One woman who contributed to this focus group reported that her husband is "*sort of in charge of the food*". This couple, along with his parents, went on to take part in the household study. Sally (39) and Stuart (42) were interviewed separately before I went on to hang out with him shopping and preparing food. Sally had reported her husband's enthusiasm for and interest in cooking had rubbed off on and inspired her. I expected to meet someone who would recreate vivid memories of the food of his childhood and the evolution of his passion for cooking. I was surprised to discover that Stuart's interest in cooking was relatively recent; indeed he had been inspired to change his cooking and provisioning practices "*because he saw it on a Jamie Oliver programme*". My interest here is not with why Stuart came to be 'in charge' of foodwork in his household. Rather I want to focus on the processes by which his activities are undertaken and how these challenge ideas about gendered subjectivities being fixed to/in the spaces with which they are associated.

Smith and Winchester (1998) have highlighted how men's engagement with physical and emotional spaces outside the home has also facilitated a reconstitution of their relationship to activities which take place within it. Rather than emasculating men in the way that was perhaps feared among older generations of men and women (Cameron 1998; Segal 2007), they suggest that men's engagement with the domestic can, conversely, provide opportunities to engage with alternate expressions of masculinity to those available in competitive, public spaces, such as the workplace; for example, in doing care through parenting, or exercising creativity through cooking. But workplace and domestic subjectivities, for example, do not have to exist in isolation from each other. For example, in his study of an urban firehouse in the US, Deutsch (2005) reports how domestic values and family ideologies are invoked and reproduced in the workplace as fire-fighters demonstrate caring subjectivities in preparing food for each other. In my study, the 'flow' operated in the other direction where we see an extension of the skills associated with the workplace within the home environment. Stuart works in IT; during his interview he opened up his laptop to demonstrate the databases he had created to store his favourite *Good Food* recipes, and to plan the family's meals, a response to he and Sally getting "*sick of eating the same things*", and their over-consumption of red meat. Clearly, Stuart's workplace skills are invoked and this facilitates both his enjoyment of food provisioning and consumption, but also the effectiveness with which he can undertake his responsibilities. The recipe database enables him to avoid having to spend time leafing through recipe books and magazines, while the meal planner – dating back three years – not only allows him to see when they last ate a particular ingredient or dish, but also facilitates the creation of a shopping list – relative to the required ingredients – which is linked to and stored on his mobile

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<sup>8</sup> Elsewhere (Meah and Jackson 2013; Meah, under revision) I have discussed the territorial tensions emerging from men's presence in 'women's domain', sometimes leading to a sense of 'crowding', or estrangement and loss of power for women.



phone, which he refers to while shopping. Utilising work-based skills and competencies enables Stuart to accomplish several things which may or may not be regarded as gendered, but nonetheless attract attention since they are tasks or responsibilities which are culturally associated with women: he is the caring husband/father concerned that his family eats a varied repertoire of dishes; he is able to complete meal planning, provisioning and cooking efficiently, enabling him to spend time with his family; he is able to plan food consumption thriftily to avoid waste and to ensure that the household resources are not strained. While Stuart's workplace identity clearly plays a role in reconstituting the way in which his masculinity is expressed within the home, likewise, his culinary endeavours are a source of unexpected capital in the workplace since he reports making flapjacks to share at meetings and exchanging preserves with colleagues, surely unsettling perceptions of domestic masculinities as viewed from the perspective of the workplace.

### **Foodwork as a haven from hegemonic masculinities**

While Stuart clearly demonstrates the flow between different workplace and domestic subjectivities, Smith and Winchester (1998) also observe that for some men, the domestic sphere can represent an opportunity to retreat from the everyday pressures and expectations of work-based identities. Indeed, Beer (1983: 107) suggests that participation in domestic activities offers tangible results: 'concrete pleasures and immediate gratification' distinct from the alienating routines and lack of creativity associated with paid work. There was more evidence in support of these observations within my data and cooking emerged, among men of all ages, as providing an opportunity to relax, be creative, to lose oneself in mundane activities which are neither mentally or physically taxing. For example Laura (63) reported how her husband, Ted (65) had previously suffered with myalgic encephalopathy (ME), prompting her to speculate:

*Laura: ...I think cooking kind of helped him get over the M.E., although I don't know whether he would say that. He always seemed to really kind of be in a good state when he was cooking, you know. He could come in from work and you know, quite tired and yet...*

*AM: He was energised by it?*

*Laura: Yeah, yeah, he always seemed very focussed and calm and that kind of calm, focussed energy when cooking.*

This was explored during my work with Ted – the principal cook in the household – whom I interviewed and spent several hours observing on two separate occasions; during both, he was 'under-the-weather', but as soon as he started cooking, the calm, quiet focus Laura spoke of could be observed. Here, he reflects on his enjoyment of what, ordinarily, might be regarded as mundane and repetitive activities, but which are transformed into something perhaps more meditative and satisfying:

*"I love [baking bread] 'cause of the kneading, I love kneading. I get this (...) <sup>9</sup> this mess of stuff into this beautiful silky ball (.) dough and then... chopping vegetables (.) to make er (...) a base for a dish, and I just I'd, I'd chop, I'd just start chopping and immediately my mood would change".*

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<sup>9</sup> (.) Indicates a short pause/hesitation; (...) indicates a longer pause/hesitation.

When performed as part of everyday foodwork, for many women these kinds of activities are perhaps associated with repetitive, routine drudgery, with resentment often resulting from having to take responsibility for decisions about what to eat rather than the cooking itself (see Short 2006)<sup>10</sup>. However, for Ted, appreciating that *“one of the very pleasures of life is sitting down at the table with food that you’ve just cooked”*, transforms foodwork into something to be enjoyed, rather than endured, and represents a distraction from the pressures experienced during their working lives.

Ted and Laura’s son, Jonathan (38) is another example here. He reports how discovering cooking, via the British cookery programme *Ready Steady Cook*, gave him a sense of purpose and productivity which were absent to him as an unemployed graduate living at his parents’ home. He says:

*“I wasn’t depressed, but I was back in (.) finished at [university]... So finished without a job... and not really accomplishing much else... And Ready Steady Cook had just started.... I kind of joined in with that a little bit I suppose... Getting quite a bit of confidence from being able to churn it out really... I was obviously (.) I was doing bits of work, but effectively a sort of a layabout, but cooking these things for Dad, who was like ‘Oh that’s good! That’s fabulous! How did you, where did you learn to do that?’ And there was a bit of a shift, you know (.) from him doing all the cooking to me being prepared to say ‘Well I want to cook because I’ve got something I want to try’”.*

While these activities arguably help promote Jonathan’s sense of confidence, enabling him to feel that he’s making a contribution and also facilitates a form of male sociality (Hollows 2003; Brownlie and Hewer 2007) between himself and his father and – he also reports – his subsequent housemates, motivations for cooking were quite different for another of my participants. Azam (35) was divorced, had lost access to his children, was unemployed and being treated with medication for depression when I met him. He lived alone, but was in regular contact – by telephone – with his mother and sisters. He reported that he had learned to cook curries since becoming single in order to facilitate his self-imposed isolation: he did not want to have to see other people, but also wanted to make sure that he ate reasonably well, as opposed to relying on *“junk”*. While it had perhaps not been an intended outcome, Azam speculates that had he not got into cooking:

*“I would be in a lot worse state than I am... it’s very therapeutic because I’ve really started to enjoy it. When I, when the taste started getting better, I enjoyed it even more; I’ve been able to cook sometimes as good as my mum”.*

When probed about this and whether cooking gave him a sense of achievement when confronted with personal ‘failure’, he agrees that this was the case: *“Cooking gives me good karma. It makes me feel better, especially when I’m eating it or sharing it with people”*. This observation was echoed among other male participants, but was not absent in women’s accounts either. In a very particular example, when observing Azam’s mother preparing food during Ramadan, she explained that Muslims are taught that they will receive *“blessings from Allah”* from sharing their food with others.

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<sup>10</sup> Baking (cakes) occupies a slightly different category since it is no longer part of everyday cooking. Women focus group participants identified it as ‘fun’, and something that grandmothers often do with grandchildren, while Liz (55), a household study participant, reported: *“I find it relaxing to bake, I mean I can come in from work and start baking ‘cause... that’s my way of coming down”*, an observation not dissimilar to that made by Ted.

Azam's case is more interesting when we consider what both he and his mother observe about how men's cooking is regarded within South Asian cultures. Azam explained that his brother-in-law was also learning to cook and that when she had heard about this, this man's mother had "taken the piss taken out of him" as she sees cooking as a 'woman's job'. As reported by Cameron (1998: 299) it is women, in this case, who find challenges to the organisation of domestic life most unsettling.

### **Queering 'masculinity' and 'femininity' in practice**

In *Crowded Kitchens* (2013), Peter Jackson and I briefly reported how specialist equipment play a role in actively configuring their users (Shove et al. 2007, 23), reminding us both that things are 'consumed not for their own sake, but for what they make possible' (Shove et al. 2007, 22) and, more simply, that 'special cooking gadgets proclaim the special cook' (Adler 1981, 48). In deliberating the question of what, exactly, is it that constitutes masculinity and femininity in the context of the kitchen, I decided that it might be useful to revisit some of the observations I made about how different users engaged with knives and chopping boards, for example. I had a sense that my observations of men were characterised by display, particularly as several were seen to display pseudo-professional knife skills, while women tended to be more understated in their performances and concerned with getting the job done quickly, as opposed to meticulousness or precision.

However, on re-examining a selection of the photos I took of my male participants preparing food, I was struck by a number of things which effectively 'queer' what we understand of 'masculine' (and 'feminine') behaviour and practice. Take Figure 1, which features Ted, equipped with his expensive Japanese knife (a birthday gift from son Jonathan, he informed me), chopping the ingredients that will form the base of a Tuscan peasant dish, one of his speciality dishes. He is using a large wooden chopping board; *his* chopping board. Speaking of this piece of equipment, his wife, Laura, complains that it is something that she feels she has to "lug about; I feel it's... macho". As with other items of equipment in the couple's kitchen, its size and weight excludes her from its use.



Figure 1: Ted's 'macho' chopping board and knife

Contrast the image of Ted with his "macho" equipment with Figure 2. Here he is pictured wearing his apron, carefully making delicate puff-pastry *panadillas*. Do the apron and delicate nature of his culinary endeavours render him 'unmanly' in this instance?



Figure 2: Ted sporting an apron – a challenge to his masculinity?

Likewise, in figure 3, we see Azam slowly, patiently and painstakingly peeling a head of garlic with an ordinary kitchen knife (not a “*flash*”, or specialist one).



Figure 3: Azam – patient, precise, ‘feminine’...?

What is perhaps more extraordinary about this image is that since Azam had already peeled and chopped his garlic and onions prior to my arrival – something which I had specifically wanted to observe – I exploited the fact that I knew him and ‘insisted’ that he peel and chop a few cloves of garlic again. Without objection or resistance, he proceeded to peel the entire head of garlic with precision and care. This contrasted with both other men, who were observed ‘bashing’ garlic with the blades of their big knives, and – interestingly – with Azam’s mother, Nazra (55). Indeed, in figure 4, Nazra is pictured in perhaps the most ‘macho’ of demonstrations. Lacking her son’s patience and meticulousness, time-pressed Nazra can be seen literally bashing away, first at chillies, then at a

whole head of garlic, complete with skin, because she “*can’t be bothered*” to spend time peeling and chopping individual cloves with a knife in the way that her son does.



Figure 4: Nazra’s ‘macho’ display

In each of these images, my participants – male and female – subvert, or ‘queer’, our expectations of ‘proper’ masculine and feminine behaviours via mundane acts of food preparation. In doing so, they expose the subtlety with which gender is enacted or performed in domestic kitchens.

## Conclusion

The observations made within this chapter must be considered provisional since they are based both on the experiences of a very small group of men and may not reflect the meanings and significance that cooking had for the participants themselves. Nonetheless, my aim has been to illustrate how individuals’ shifting relationships, both with other family members, and with those spaces outside of the home, particularly work, have impacted upon the domestic. Indeed, masculine and feminine subjectivities are not immutable. Not only are they increasingly required to respond to the vagaries of daily domestic routines which place demands on all household members, but changing social and structural conditions have required a fundamental reconceptualisation of questions regarding what constitutes ‘masculinity’ and ‘femininity’ and the assumed ‘naturalness’ of sex-based domestic roles and practices. These shifts have consequently prompted such questions as: is it ‘demeaning’ for a man to cook, as it may have been regarded by earlier generations (Hockey et al. 2007); and is it still ‘unmanly’ for men to iron (Cameron 1998)? Likewise, gendered subjectivities are not neatly or discretely contained in the workplace, leisure spaces or the home, but slippage in our occupational and domestic subjectivities occurs as we move within and between these spaces. In

adopting a more spatially curious (Allen 2004: 19) approach which emphasises the slippage which occurs as men and women move between the range of spaces they inhabit, drawing upon skills, competencies and modes of sociality associated with one domain when engaging with another, it is perhaps more appropriate to conceptualise gendered subjectivities not just as multiple and fluid, but as more amorphous than previously imagined. Indeed, my observations of men and women 'doing gender' in their kitchens expands the possibilities of the either-or-ness which currently constrains how we conceptualise 'masculinity' and 'femininity'.

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