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Reframing convenience food

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Abstract

This paper provides a critical review of recent research on the consumption of 'convenience' food, highlighting the contested nature of the term and exploring its implications for public health and environmental sustainability. It distinguishes between convenience food in general and particular types of convenience food, such as ready-meals, tracing the structure and growth of the market for such foods with a particular emphasis on the UK which currently has the highest rate of ready-meal consumption in Europe. Having established the definitional complexities of the term, the paper presents the evidence from a systematic review of the literature, highlighting the significance of convenience food in time-saving and time-shifting, the importance of recent changes in domestic labour and family life, and the way the consumption of convenience food is frequently moralized. The paper shows how current debates about convenience food are part of a longer discursive history about food, health and nutrition. It discusses current levels of public understanding about the links between convenience food, environmental sustainability and food waste. The paper concludes by making a case for understanding the consumption of convenience food in terms of everyday social practices, emphasising its habitual and routine character.

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Keywords:

Convenience food, ready meals, health, sustainability, theories of practice

Highlights:

- The paper highlights the contested nature of 'convenience' food and its inadequacies as an explanatory concept
- It demonstrates the negative moral evaluation of 'convenience' food in contrast to the socially-valued nature of 'home-made' food (with which it is frequently combined in practice)
- It proposes a reframing of 'convenience' food within an empirically-grounded understanding of everyday consumer practice

Reframing convenience food

Introduction

In a recent paper in this journal, Scholliers (2015) traces academic interest in 'convenience foods' back to the 1920s, with a rapid upsurge in references to the concept in the 1970s and a 'stormy increase' after the year 2000.[1] He cites an early definition of the term from the UK Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food which proposed that convenience foods are 'products of the food industries in which the degree of culinary preparation has been carried out to an advanced stage and which are purchased as labour-saving versions of less highly processed products' (MAFF 1959, quoted in Scholliers 2015: 3). Noting the diversity of meanings that attach to the concept, encompassing convenience shopping, storing, cooking, eating and cleaning up, Scholliers highlights the need for conceptual common ground, also noting how changing definitions of convenience foods mirror the historical period of their use. This paper seeks to advance Scholliers' argument, building on his analysis of academic citations with a critical review of recent work on convenience food, focusing primarily on English-language sources since 2000.

Though definitions are multiple and contested, 'convenience foods' encompass a wide variety of processed and semi-processed food, frequently contrasted with 'fresh' foods using raw ingredients, cooked from scratch.[2] Convenience foods are often regarded as among the least healthy and most unsustainable of dietary options in terms of their low nutritional value, wasteful packaging and heavy reliance on imported ingredients. For example, a study published in the *British Medical Journal* found that none of the 100 supermarket ready-meals it tested fully complied with WHO dietary guidelines (Howard et al. 2012), while another study described the composition of ready-meals as 'nutritionally chaotic' (University of Glasgow 2012). Meanwhile, the UK Department

[1] Yale and Venkatesh (1986) suggest that the earliest reference to convenience food was in a paper by Copeland (1923) which made the distinction between convenience, shopping and speciality goods.

[2] On the nature of freshness as a complex and contested categorization of food, see Freidberg's (2009) 'perishable history'.

for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs' Green Food Project concluded that convenience foods such as supermarket ready-meals typically include resource-intensive ingredients, responsible for high greenhouse gas emissions, consuming large volumes of energy, land and water, and with high transportation costs (Defra 2012a), while a study of food waste by the Waste and Resources Action Programme found that ready-meals were one of the most frequently wasted foods by UK households (WRAP 2007). Having provided a critical review of the research evidence on these issues, we propose an alternative way of understanding convenience food, reframing its significance within an analysis of the social practices of consumers' everyday lives.

The paper is part of a project on Food, Convenience and Sustainability (FOCAS), funded via the ERA-Net sustainable food programme (SUSFOOD).[3] The FOCAS project aims to understand how 'convenience' food is defined by consumers and how its use relates to consumer understandings of healthy eating and environmental sustainability; with what specific practices (shopping, cooking, eating, disposing) 'convenience' foods are associated; how such foods are incorporated within different household contexts and domestic routines; and to what extent current consumption practices may be subject to change (towards more sustainable and healthier practices). The UK component of the research, including the current literature review, is funded by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) and focuses on the health and sustainability of supermarket ready-meals. It will be followed by ethnographic research at the household level with consumers in the UK and Germany (the European countries with the highest consumption of ready-meals) funded by Defra and the German Federal Ministry of Food and Agriculture (BMEL).

A chaotic conception

'Convenience food' is a highly contested category, subject to multiple interpretations and different uses (Halkier 2013: 119). For example, Szabo (2011: 562) uses the concept to refer to fast foods,

[3] Further information about the FOCAS project is available at: http://www.sheffield.ac.uk/focas.

94 snack foods and packaged/canned/frozen/pre-prepared foods as well as to the idea of convenience
95 in provisioning foods that do not require direct involvement from the consumer in the work of
96 growing/raising/harvesting it. The breadth of convenience food as a category is underlined by
97 Halkier (2014) who includes fresh fruit cut in cubes, grilled sausages from the petrol station, organic
98 Indian carrot soup and trans-fat fried chicken drumsticks from the supermarket freezer. As these
99 comments suggest, 'convenience' is a problematic term when applied to food, with multiple and
100 unstable meanings (Jackson 2013), described by Bava et al. as 'a complex and multi-dimensional
101 construct' (2008: 486).[4] Even within a specific domain such as food marketing and retailing,
102 'convenience food' is a very broad category encompassing processed foods, manufactured for mass
103 consumption, including frozen, chilled, dried and canned goods; confectionery, snacks and
104 beverages; processed meat, pasta and cheese; take-away food and ready-meals.
105 Definitional issues persist even when a more restricted category of convenience food such as
106 'ready-meals' is considered. For example, Howard et al. (2012: 2) define ready-meals as those that
107 are designed to be eaten hot and not for special occasions or for breakfast. They excluded soups but
108 included supermarkets' own-brand meals, bought within the container to be used for cooking the
109 product and with a preparation time of 15 minutes or less, and with a recommended serving size of
110 at least 225 grams. Alternatively, market research company AC Nielsen (2006) define ready-to-eat
111 meals as frozen or fresh, hot or cold, fully prepared and purchased in-store to be eaten elsewhere,
112 excluding canned, take-away and fast food.
113 Comparative research on the meaning of 'convenience food' in different European contexts
114 helps shed light on the term's social and cultural complexity. In Danish, for example, the English
115 term 'convenience food' translates to either *sammensat fødevare* (compound foodstuff) or
116 *convenience mad* (convenience food) while other relevant Danish culinary categories include
117 *færdigmad* (ready-made food), *hurtigmad* (fast food), *nem mad* (easy food), *halvfabrikata*
118 (processed food) and *tage-med-mad* ('to go' food). In Swedish, the English term translates as

[4] The multidimensionality of the term was also recognised by Yale and Venkatesh (1986).

119 *lättlagad mat*, *snabbmat*, *bekvämmat* or *färdigmat* (respectively, easily-made food, fast food,
120 comfortable food or ready-made food), while in German, the most common comparable terms
121 include *Fertig-Gericht* (ready/instant-meal), *Schnell-Gericht* (fast-meal), *Fertig-Essen* (ready food)
122 and *Fertig-Fraß* (ready-grub).[5]

123 It is also important to note that convenience foods do not stand alone as a separate
124 category in terms of everyday consumption being frequently combined with other kinds of food,
125 ranging from 'low-convenience-products', such as frozen spinach that requires additional labour and
126 further ingredients, to 'high-convenience-products' (Ernährungsnetzwerk 2011) such as ready-made
127 pasta sauce to which fresh ingredients may be added or frozen pizza, enhanced with additional
128 toppings. Further complexity derives from the frequent polarisation of 'traditional' foods, based on
129 raw ingredients cooked from scratch, and the consumption of ready-meals, fast food and other
130 types of 'convenient' food -- a distinction which Grinnell Wright et al. describe as 'not necessarily
131 helpful' (2013: 22). Marshall and Bell (2003: 62) insist that convenience and home-made foods are
132 part of a continuum, not two separate categories, distinguished by context not content, while Warde
133 adopts a similar argument suggesting that convenience food is 'not just a set of properties of food
134 items but … a matter of social context' (1999: 519). In a seminal paper, Grunert (2003)
135 acknowledges that 'convenience' is not a clearly defined concept but usually involves making
136 something easier, saving time or mental effort at various phases of meal preparation including
137 planning, preparation, eating and cleaning up afterwards (see also Scholderer & Grunert 2005,
138 Jaeger & Meiselman 2004). Grunert further suggests that convenience foods may be a substitute for
139 meals taken inside or outside the home, with movement possible in both directions (when
140 consumers use convenience food as a cheaper substitute for a restaurant meal or when their
141 experience of restaurant eating affects their choice of particular kinds of convenience food).

142 Convenience food is, then, an example of what Andrew Sayer (1992: 138) calls a 'chaotic
143 conception' which arbitrarily divides the indivisible and/or lumps together the unrelated and the

[5] Thanks to our ERA-Net colleagues for these insights.

144 inessential. As Sayer argues, such concepts are relatively unproblematic in everyday usage and
145 when used in scientific discourse *for descriptive purposes*, but they become problematic when
146 explanatory weight is placed upon them. Given this definitional complexity, the remaining analysis
147 distinguishes between convenience food as a general category and specific types of convenience
148 food such as ready-meals, though this distinction is not always clearly made in the literature or in
149 consumers' everyday lives. For example, Olsen et al. (2009: 766) perpetuate exactly the kind of
150 categorical confusion that Sayer laments by defining convenience as 'food products bought and
151 consumed with the objective of saving time and effort ("ready meals")' while Costa et al. suggest
152 that 'convenience *determines* … when, where, what, how and even with whom we eat' (2007: 77,
153 emphasis added) suggesting that 'convenience' can bear more explanatory weight than such a
154 chaotic conception merits.
155

156 ## Structure and growth of the convenience food market

157 The convenience food sector has seen rapid growth across Europe and particularly in the UK since
158 the 1970s.[6] Focusing specifically on ready-meals, market researchers estimate that the UK sector is
159 now worth more than £3 billion with the chilled sector outperforming the frozen sector by a ratio of
160 approximately 5:1. In Germany, the convenience food sector is dominated by frozen products,
161 especially frozen pizza, which accounted for about 37% of ready-meal sales in 2011 (Minister of
162 Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada 2012).[7]

163 The UK consumption of ready-meals is estimated to be double that of France and six times
164 more than Spain (Mintel 2010). Mintel also report that while the demand for ready-meals across
165 Europe rose by 29% between 1998 and 2002, the UK market increased by 44% over the same period.
166 In the UK, supermarket own-brand products dominate the ready-meal market with Tesco (24%) and

[6] On global trends in the adoption of convenience foods, see Sheely (2008).

[7] The annual per head consumption of frozen foods in Germany in 2014 was 42.2kg (WirtschaftsWoche, 16 April 2015).

Marks & Spencer (23%) having a roughly equal market share (Mintel 2013). As research on the growing demand for ready-meals in Ireland demonstrates, the sector is retailer-driven, with own-label brands taking an estimated 90% market share (Reed et al. 2000: 235; see also Reed et al. 2001). Numerous chilled and frozen lines have been developed at various price points including a wide range of 'ethnic' cuisines such as Indian, Chinese and Italian dishes.[8]

Chilled ready-meals were introduced in the UK during the 1970s as a more 'upmarket' alternative to the American-style frozen TV dinner, introduced in the United States by companies such as Swanson's in the 1950s. The invention of chilled ready-meals depended on industrial innovations such as the development of the 'cold chain' (which facilitated the widespread availability of fresh as opposed to frozen chicken among other products) and a willingness among British retailers and consumers to experiment with relatively unfamiliar ingredients (such as garlic butter in Chicken Kiev) – as described by Salter (2010) and Winterman (2013). High-street retailers like Marks & Spencer were keen to capitalise on the increasing number of British consumers who had experienced foreign cuisine while taking holidays abroad and on the growing popularity of 'eating out' in restaurants (Warde & Martens 2000). Ready-meals were designed to capture this market by offering restaurant-quality food for home consumption at a fraction of the cost, offering a 'respectable' alternative to frozen TV dinners (Usborne 2009).

As the market has become increasingly saturated, new product development has focused on the introduction of healthier options (with lower salt and/or sugar content), gourmet brands and products that target particular consumer segments (such as children or those seeking lower-calorie alternatives) with increasing differentiation between budget, mid-range and premium brands. A recent report in *Packaging News* (4 March 2013) suggested that UK sales of ready-meals had plateaued and may now be declining, reflecting adverse market conditions (economic recession) and

[8] In the Irish context, Reed et al. identify nine categories of chilled ready meals by 'cuisine type' including Italian, Traditional, Chinese, Indian, Mexican/USA, healthy eating, vegetable, other ethnic and fish/meat.

190 the impact of recent events such as the 2013 horsemeat incident, where numerous supermarket
191 brands were found to have been adulterated (Jackson 2015).

192 In a recent paper, Daniels and Glorieux (2015) propose a useful typology that distinguishes
193 between non-convenience, semi-convenience and convenience foods, the former two categories
194 covering meal ingredients and accessories, the latter referring to full meals. While their
195 classification provides some welcome clarity and helps identify where different types of food are
196 positioned in relation to one another, we would suggest that the firm line separating convenience
197 and semi-convenience food (see Figure 1) is blurred in practice as consumers regularly transgress
198 these classificatory boundaries in their everyday lives. The typology is, however, helpful in guiding
199 our review.

NON-CONVENIENCE	*SEMI-CONVENIENCE*	*CONVENIENCE*	
Meal ingredients		*Full (fast) meals*	
(1) Preparation meals - single meal components used for cooking from scratch (e.g. potatoes, rice, non-preserved meat)	(2) Partially-prepared and/or preserved single meal components (e.g. processed potatoes or preserved fruit)	(5) Complete fast meals (e.g. soups)	(6) Meals out (away-from-home food or restaurant expenditures)
Accessory meal ingredients			
(3) Accessory stuffs (e.g. fats and spices)	(4) Ready-made accessory stuffs (e.g. sauce)		
	(7) 'Other' (e.g. Bread, sandwich fillings, milk products and breakfast cereals)	(8) 'Ready-to-eat' snacks	

200

201 Figure 1: A typology of convenience foods (Daniels & Glorieux 2015)

202

203 ## Sources, methods and purpose

204 Our review of recent work on convenience food adopts the principles of a systematic literature
205 review, searching key terms within set parameters to produce a comprehensive database of all
206 relevant outputs before refining the search and using our academic judgement to select a smaller

number of papers for detailed review. Our search focused on sources published in English and a smaller number of publications in Danish, French and German. We used various combinations of the terms 'convenience', 'food', 'environment', 'sustainability' and 'health' (and closely-related variants of these terms). Relevant 'grey literature' (such as government reports, newspaper articles and market research reports) was also included. The search focused on literature published between 2000 and 2015, together with a handful of 'classic' papers from earlier research.[9] Our initial trawl which used Google Scholar, Web of Knowledge and Science Direct as well as key government reports from Defra (2009, 2013) and related sources (Grinnell-Wright et al. 2013) identified over a thousand papers. A process of manual sifting based on reading titles and abstracts reduced the list to around 300 papers of which the most relevant 50-60 publications were highlighted for closer reading based on their relevance to the research aims (listed above). We summarise the findings of our review under a number of thematic headings before presenting an alternative framing of convenience food in terms of the social practices through which consumers incorporate such foods in their everyday lives.

Time-saving and time-shifting

Warde (1999) relates the increased consumption of convenience food to the competing demands and scheduling problems of an increasingly de-routinized society (cf. Jabs & Devine 2006 for an overview of the relationship between time scarcity and food choice). Warde describes the appeal of time-shifting as well as time-saving devices including fridges, freezers and microwave ovens, acknowledging that the history of domestic innovation may not have reduced the actual amount of time spent in the kitchen as new technologies have led to rising standards of comfort and cleanliness

[9] Classic papers were defined as those with a high level of citations that continue to be referenced in current work. Examples include Yale and Venkatesh (1986) and Warde (1999).

(cf. Cowan 1985, Shove 2003).[10] Warde also suggests that 'convenience' only took on its current temporal associations with the rise of 'convenience food' and 'convenience stores' in the 1960s when *The Guardian* newspaper declared that 'No one would deny the drudgery, the time-wasting, the monotony, that has been removed by convenience foods' (6 December 1968). Despite such optimism and apparent consensus, Warde maintains that 'there is still considerable ambivalence about convenience food' (1999: 520), explored in more detail by Olsen et al. (2010).

Besides technical innovations in the food industry such as the invention of the 'cold chain' (described above), the commercial success of convenience food also depended on a series of related developments in domestic technology, including the increasingly widespread availability of refrigeration and microwave cooking. In the 1960s, for example, 40% of UK households did not have a refrigerator whereas now they are all but ubiquitous (Defra 2009: 45). Likewise, Shove and Southerton (2000) report that whereas 30 years ago only 3% of UK consumers owned a freezer, by 1995 more than 96% of households had one or more. The growth of car ownership and supermarket shopping also had a positive impact on the rise of convenience food, together with the widespread availability of microwave cooking (see also Watkins 2006, Shove et al. 2007).

There is some intriguing evidence that the point at which 'convenience' is sought in the process of food consumption varies between countries as do the perceived advantages of convenience food. For example, storage seems to play a greater role in the practice of convenience food consumption amongst Dutch consumers who value the convenience aspects of its acquisition and storage (Costa et al. 2007: 86).[11] This is less the case for UK consumers who prefer chilled ready-meals which can be frozen at home but are mostly bought for consumption within a few days, locating 'convenience' primarily in cooking and eating rather than acquiring and storing food.

[10] Shove (2003) suggests that the introduction of new technologies such as fridges, freezers and microwaves, designed to increase personal convenience, may have had the paradoxical effect of exacerbating the scheduling and coordination of social life as collective convention and temporal ordering are eroded.

[11] Costa et al. are referring here to specific types of ready-meals such as frozen pizza and chilled hot-pot.

In focus group research with Irish consumers, participants gave numerous reasons for purchasing ready-meals including time pressures due to work commitments, catering to the dietary needs and preferences of different family members who may not eat the same food (including vegetarians) or who eat at different times, and suitability for eating at work or as a stand-by (Reed et al. 2000: 238). Many sources report the decreasing amount of time that households spend preparing food, with Grinnell-Wright et al. (2103: 22) citing a 2002 UK study in which the average amount of time spent on cooking a main evening meal was 8 minutes. They also report a 2001 Euromonitor study in which the average number of evening meals cooked from scratch was estimated at one meal a week (ibid.: 20) while a Change-4-Life study reported that 'only' 16% of UK mothers cooked from scratch every day (ibid.: 23). Market researchers refer to consumers' 'busy lives and changing life-stages' as key drivers for changes in the UK ready-meal market -- see also Brunner et al. (2010)[12] on the drivers of convenience food consumption among German-speaking Swiss consumers and Buckley et al. (2007)[13] on lifestyle segmentation and convenience food consumption in Britain.[14]

Celnik et al. discuss how marketing might create or increase perceived time-scarcity and the need for convenience: 'The perceived benefits [of convenience food] extend beyond merely leaving more time for social activities: they include stress-reduction, more relaxed lifestyle, and facilitation of hosting of social events' (2012: 4). They suggest that these beliefs might reflect marketing messages which depend on, but which might also generate, perceived time-scarcity with possible

[12] Brunner et al. (2010) analyse 17 specific convenience food items including highly processed foods (such as chilled and frozen ready-meals), moderately processed items (such as ready-made sandwiches), single components (such as frozen French fries) and pre-packed salads.

[13] Buckley et al. (2007) compare eating out, purchasing take-away food, cooking from ingredients and eating snacks.

[14] This is an example of where 'convenience' has shifted from being a professional (marketing) term for particular kinds of food to a category that consumers acknowledge as important in their everyday lives. These categories sometimes overlap as when 'convenience' food changes its discursive meaning from being seen as modern and liberating to being seen as potentially harmful to the environment and human health.

trade-offs between convenience, healthiness and taste.[15] Lack of skill or dislike of cooking, perceived value for money and variable family eating times may all encourage 'solutions' such as ready-meals (De Boer et al. 2004).[16] The notion that marketing ready-meals may actually *promote* time-scarcity resonates with the concept of a 'food-related lifestyle' as described by Brunsø and Grunert (1995; see also Hoek et al. 2004 and Perez-Cueto et al. 2010). Warde et al. (1998) also suggest that the advertising of 'convenience' may make people more conscious of the passing of time, its practical irreversibility, its value to those who see life in terms of self-development and the kind of individualism that sees mortality as the end of meaning.

Domestic labour and family life

Scholliers (2015) suggests that social change was as important as technological innovation in explaining the growing popularity of convenience food. He notes the following 'drivers' of increased convenience food consumption: changing household structure, female participation in the labour force, inventive manufacturers, appealing advertisements, ownership of kitchen technology, individualism, time usage, and lack of cooking skills. Szabo (2011) specifically relates the rising demand for convenience food to the growth of female labour-force participation and women's longer working hours outside the home. The use of pre-prepared (convenience) food, she concludes, was an effective way to manage food preparation in the context of women's increasingly busy working lives (ibid.: 552). These social dynamics are nicely captured in Swanson's early advertising for convenience food ("I'm late – but dinner won't be!") which implied that American housewives could maintain busy working and/or social lives without sacrificing the taste and values of home-cooked meals. Food marketing and advertising continue to target working women and

[15] Celnik et al. (2012) analysed the nutritional values of four typical ready-meals sold in UK supermarkets (macaroni cheese, lasagne, cottage pie and chicken tikka massala).

[16] De Boer et al (2004) defined convenience food very broadly and compared four convenience food categories: ready meals (e.g. supermarket ready-meals or frozen pizza), takeaway meals (e.g. Indian take-away or delivery, McDonalds), restaurant meals, and pub meals.

busy housewives with convenient 'meal solutions' to help them deal with time-scarcity and restore their work-life balance (RnR Market Research 2013). Yet, as O'Connell et al. suggest, an alternative reading is possible where the provision of 'convenience food solutions' may in fact help conserve the status quo rather than advancing gender equality, enabling women to combine motherhood and paid employment without significantly modifying either sets of demands (O'Connell et al. 2015: 3, see also: O'Connell & Brannen, in press).

Meanwhile, working mothers continue to be blamed for neglecting their children's nutritional needs and dietary health -- see, for example, Nestlé Deutschland (2011: 49) who rehearse the argument that 'growing female employment impacts negatively on families' eating culture'. Szabo (2011) takes a different line, arguing that recent calls for consumers to 're-engage' with food (with greater emphasis on gustatory pleasure, commensality and quality of life, and more concern for biodiversity and the environment) overlook the labour demands and time-intensive nature of food provisioning and preparation, calling for researchers to acknowledge the employment patterns and gendered divisions of labour that affect the time available for those most involved in household food-work (cf. Bava et al. 2008). Szabo (2011: 555) quotes evidence from the US Bureau of Labor Statistics and Statistics Canada to show that North American women spend more than twice as much time cooking and washing-up, and in food preparation and cleaning-up, as their male counterparts. She also suggests that recent changes in the domestic division of labour may result in the time and labour demands of modern food preparation among white middle-class households being shifted to lower-class and/or racialized domestic, factory, farm or store workers rather than representing a net reduction of working time for women.

In a study of the consumption of ready meals in Sweden, Ahlgren et al. (2006) demonstrate that the demand for convenience food is influenced by the gender of the purchaser and whether or

not the buyer is the end consumer. In a related study, Ahlgren et al. (2005)[17] emphasize how the meanings of ready-meals are related to the social context in which they are consumed, often eaten alone and when consumers are too tired or prefer not to cook, with almost half (47%) of their respondents reporting that such meals took less than ten minutes to prepare and eat. It may be this association with eating quickly and alone that gives convenience food its negatively-charged moral connotations.[18]

There is also evidence that the normative nature of cooking and 'feeding the family' (De Vault 1991) has been influenced by media representations, shaping gendered practices with regard to the use of convenience food. For example, Halkier argues that 'In recent years, Denmark has witnessed a growth in the amount of magazines, lifestyle sections in news media, television shows, coffee-table books and websites that celebrate everyday activities traditionally associated with domestic femininity … including cooking meals from scratch, baking, preserving, cleaning, creating and maintaining clothes, decorating the home and gardening' (2009: 358). Halkier suggests that these discourses frame everyday cooking in normative terms as 'the more home-made, the better' and 'a good meal is cooked from scratch' (ibid.: 358).

In a survey of over 700 Irish consumers, Reed et al. (2003) found associations between the consumption of ready-meals, gender and marital status, with men more likely to consume ready meals than women and single persons consuming more than married or cohabiting couples. There were also positive associations with education level and social class, with higher levels of consumption among those with tertiary education and higher (ABC1) socio-economic status. By contrast, non-consumers of chilled ready-meals tended to be women, aged over 45 years, residing in

[17] Ahlgren et al. (2005) used the following definition of ready meals in Sweden: shop-bought chilled or frozen pre-packaged ready meals consisting of two or more components, excluding canned products, if they consisted of only one component.

[18] The association between convenience food and unhealthy eating should be historicised and is part of the wider moralization of the term (discussed below). When convenience food was introduced to American housewives in the 1950s, speed of preparation was part of its appeal. Now, it has become associated with bad parenting and an unhealthy lifestyle.

a rural location, and from lower socio-economic groups (ibid.: 6). Similar results were reported in a survey of over 1000 Swiss consumers where the consumption (dietary intake) of convenience food was higher among men than women, higher among younger people (17-39 years) than other age groups, higher among single-person households and among overweight respondents, although, in contrast to the Irish study, consumption of ready-meals in the Swiss study was lower among highly educated respondents (van der Horst et al. 2010: 242)[19].

Given the historical force that has been attached to 'feeding the family' as primarily a female responsibility both in the US (De Vault 1991) and in the UK (Charles & Kerr 1988), it is no surprise that the use of convenience food in families raises particular issues for mothers. Despite the widespread use of processed baby-food, for example, Warde points out that advertisements for such products almost never make reference to their 'convenience' (1999: 520). Elsewhere, he has suggested that the distinction between 'convenience' and 'care' is one of a handful of culinary antinomies (Warde 1997), the others being health and indulgence, novelty and tradition, and economy and extravagance.

Powerful emotions are attached to family meals and the rise of convenience food is often associated with the supposed decline of commensality. In Bugge and Almås's study of 25 Norwegian mothers, for example, the alleged decline of family meals (especially hot food, cooked from scratch) is firmly associated with the disintegration of family life (2006: 206). For the women in this study, 'To cook a proper dinner for one's family is an important part of a woman's understanding of her own identity and an implicit part of realizing the ideal family and the ideal home' (ibid.: 210). Those women who do not cook, those who rarely cook and those who are thought to rely excessively on convenience food are generally looked down upon. Though subject to class and generational

[19] The ready-meal definition of Van der Horst et al. (2010) included six items (i) ready meals in a can (ravioli, chilli con carne, etc.); (ii) ready meals chilled/frozen (lasagne, nasi-goreng, etc.); (iii) instant noodles, soup or pasta (in a cup for one person); (iv) instant pasta with sauce (dried, add water, cook); (v) ready soup in bag or can; and (vi) ready pizza chilled/ frozen (see Brunner et al. (2010) for a complete list of the 17 analysed convenience food items).

differences, for women not to provide a 'proper' family meal was generally regarded as a source of shame. This external judgment has come to be internalised by many women with a quarter of full-time employed mothers in Germany stating that they feel guilty about the nutrition of their children (Nestlé Deutschland 2011: 58).

Brembeck (2005) has questioned some of these assumptions in her work on the cultural significance of McDonald's in Sweden where she argues that, under some circumstances, eating at fast-food restaurants can provide an alternative way of spending 'cosy-time' with family members, similar to the positive associations of eating at home. This suggests that Bugge and Almås are right to conclude that 'dinner cannot be said to be good or bad in itself, but only in relation to the values it is meant to realize' (2006: 220). Qualitative research in New Zealand has also revealed the trade-offs between preferred culinary practices and the constraints on busy women's lives leading to the use of convenience foods to minimize time and cognitive effort in domestic provisioning (Bava et al. 2008). Time pressures, unpredictable daily routines and lack of cooking skills are all acknowledged as important constraints on women's time, restricting their ability to fulfil their culinary ideals.

These ideas are explored in greater depth in a series of paper by Carrigan and Szmigin (2006) and Carrigan et al. (2006). In the first paper, the authors contest the idea that convenience food is always inferior to other culinary options. They cite a range of evidence to demonstrate the cultural specificity of convenience food, including a Dutch study of TV dinners which may be regarded as an acceptable meal in some circumstances but which is not regarded as suitable for entertaining guests (Verlegh & Candel 1999)[20]; a study of Irish mothers who use take-away food as a treat for family and friends (De Boer et al. 2004); and an Italian study where ready-made convenience foods are sometimes seen as an acceptable 'shortcut' for delivering traditional family meals (Romani 2005). They conclude that a mother's use of convenience products may be as eloquent a statement of her

[20] TV dinners, called 'prototypical convenience food' by Verlegh & Candel (1999), because they reduce the time and effort of meal preparation, are defined as 'meals bought in stores, and prepared at home by re-heating' (p. 457).

love and care for her family as the cooking of food from scratch and that the use of such foods may be a strategy for mothers to enhance (rather than detracting from) their devotion to their families (Carrigan & Szmigin 2006: 1127). Women, they suggest, have developed strategies that embrace, accept and adapt 'convenience', enabling the delivery of care and nurturing in new ways. For some, these practices remain guilt-ridden, while for others they are acceptable strategies that are consistent with the identity of being a good mother (ibid.: 1128). They suggest that there is a hierarchy of acceptability for different kinds of convenience food, allowing women to demonstrate artful compromise through the pragmatic combination of different foods, exercising their agency as 'mothers of invention'.[21]

This hierarchy of more-or-less acceptable convenience foods is taken further by Carrigan et al. (2006) showing how women incorporate convenience foods into reworked versions of home-made food and 'proper' meals, making necessary concessions and acknowledging the emotional complexity that surrounds the use of such foods. In this reading, convenience food can help women alleviate conflicts over food choice, retaining family cohesion in the face of other contemporary life pressures (ibid.: 374). Similar compromises are reported from the US where Moisio et al. suggest that food companies have attempted to imbue processed food with the character, tradition and meaning of home-made food in order to increase its acceptability to consumers who face the normative pressures for convenience, casualness and speed (2004: 362). Their study reveals that Midwestern consumers value the sensory qualities of home-made food and its ability to invoke idealized memories of childhood, discreetly ignoring the fact that many 'home-made' products are 'at least partially manufactured, produced, packaged, and distributed through the market' (ibid.: 367). They also acknowledge degrees of 'home-made' cooking provided certain thresholds are met

[21] On the conceptualization and measurement of consumers' convenience orientation towards meal preparation, see Candel (2001).

403 in terms of dedication and effort, the use of 'authentic' fresh ingredients and adherence to recipes
404 (ibid.: 374).[22]
405

406 The moralization of convenience food

407 Exploring the etymological origins of 'convenience', Gofton (1995) suggests that the word has
408 traditionally been associated with laziness, immorality and unhealthiness. These negative
409 connotations, Gofton avers, made convenience an affront to Victorian ideals of female domesticity
410 and a potential threat to the social order (ibid.: 159). It is no surprise, then, that the term remains
411 morally ambiguous. For example, market researchers report that 21% of UK consumers feel guilty
412 about serving ready-meals (Mintel 2013). Warde (1999: 518) describes convenience food as 'tinged
413 with moral disapprobation', while Szabo suggests that 'convenience culture has gotten a bad name'
414 (2011: 547). Mäkelä (2000) highlights the low moral status of convenience food, while Mahon et al.
415 (2006) report a generally negative attitude towards ready-meals in a survey of >1000 British
416 consumers. Convenience foods and snacks are often contrasted with 'proper meals', though
417 Marshall and Bell's (2003) study of Scottish and Australian students suggests that the differences are
418 less clearly defined by the particular foods associated with each occasion and more by the social
419 context of their consumption.
420 Using survey evidence from Norway, the Netherlands and Finland, Olsen et al. (2010: 535)
421 demonstrate that moral attitude is an important predictor of the propensity to consume ready-
422 meals. While home-made cooking is highly valued, buying ready-meals is associated with feelings of
423 guilt, regret and neglecting one's duty. The women in Carrigan et al.'s (2006) British study also
424 resort to a highly moralized vocabulary of confession, guilt and responsibility when discussing
425 convenience food, while Dutch participants in the study by Costa et al. (2007) talk about the
426 importance of cooking at least one 'decent meal' per day and the feelings of reproach and regret

[22] The culturally contested notion of 'authenticity' is explored by Heldke (2003) while the paradoxical notion of 'industrial freshness' is traced by Freidberg (2009).

427 respondents associated with neglecting their domestic duties. Elsewhere, Halkier has written about
428 'suitable' cooking practices among Danish women, highlighting specific kinds of behaviour that are
429 regarded as culturally unsuitable, such as serving ready-made rice porridge (*ris a la mande*) at
430 Christmas, disdained by other family members as not tasting good because it was not 'stirred with
431 love' (2009: 371).

432 Several authors have discussed the justifications and excuses that are advanced for using
433 convenience food including the opportunity its use affords to cater for the tastes and culinary
434 preferences of different family members, to provide food at times that suit the disharmonious
435 domestic routines of parents and children, to allow children to cook for themselves when parents
436 are out and/or to enable more 'quality' time to be spent with family members without being tied to
437 the stove. It is striking how often respondents feel the need to apologise (to researchers and to each
438 other) for using convenience food, making excuses for 'cheating' and apologising for taking 'short-
439 cuts'. By contrast, Costa et al. report on the conviction among their Dutch participants 'that an
440 appropriate amount of effort, attention and time should be put into meal preparation' (2007: 87).
441 The moral issues surrounding convenience food, they suggest, take food choice 'beyond the realm of
442 economic rationality' (ibid.: 87). Comparing home-made and convenience food lead Moisio et al. to
443 suggest that 'Home-made food discourse operates as a symbolic bulwark against the intrusion of the
444 market into the domestic domain' (2004: 380) -- and that manufacturers of convenience foods
445 acknowledge this in their utilization of moral resources in the development and marketing of
446 branded products.[23]

447 Key to the moralization of convenience food is the common assumption of a link between
448 the rising consumption of pre-prepared ready-meals and other processed foods and the alleged
449 decline of cooking skills and domestic competency. For example, Grinnell-Wright et al. report on the
450 declining number of UK adults who describe themselves as skilled and willing cooks who frequently

[23] How such moralized discourses are appropriated and understood by consumers will be explored in the ethnographic phase of our current research.

cook from scratch, with one in six people saying that they cannot cook and more than half saying that they do not consider food important compared to other everyday social and cultural activities (2013: v). What they refer to as a 'well-evidenced decline in basic cooking skills' and a 'no cook culture' is, however, strongly contested elsewhere in the literature (cf. Murcott 1997, Meah et al. 2011). While some studies suggest that a lack of cooking skills is a strong predictor of ready-meal consumption (van der Horst et al. 2010), assertions about the de-skilling, de-domestication and redundancy of traditional cooking skills (Reed et al. 2003) are often based on relatively thin or increasingly dated evidence such as that provided by Caraher et al. (1999). This is an area in which more research is urgently needed, including a more consistent definition of what should count as basic cooking skills (cf. Short 2006). An assumed deficit of cooking skills has also often featured in the discursive history of diet and nutrition where normative judgements abound.

Convenience food in the discursive history of health and nutrition

The negative associations of convenience food for public health have been widely discussed in the medical literature which posits a link between high levels of consumption of such foods and a range of health-related issues including increasing obesity rates (cf. van der Horst et al. 2010, Alkerwi et al. 2015). While the nutritional consequences of specific diets have been subject to heated debate, many health experts advocate a strongly normative position, encouraging individuals to eat less sugar, salt and saturated fats. Rather than prescribing what consumers should or should not eat, we seek to understand the place of convenience food within the discursive history of health and nutritional advice. This history includes the invention of a series of measures, such as the body-mass index (BMI), sodium intake and fibre density that tend to separate 'good' from 'bad' eating practices and enable the moralization of those who consume 'too much' of the 'wrong' kinds of food. As the history of the BMI demonstrates, the medical basis of such measures is disputed and their social implications are deeply contested (cf. Guthman 2013). Within these discursive histories, different

476 types of food have shifted from being lionized (as modern and progressive) to being demonized (as
477 harmful and regressive) – see, for example, Levenstein's (2012) entertaining history of American
478 food fears.

479 In a Belgian study, Geeroms et al. (2008)[24] explore the link between health-related
480 motivation and ready-meal consumption. Based on an on-line survey of just under 2000
481 respondents, the researchers used a combination of statistical techniques (cluster analysis and
482 ANOVA) to identify five consumer segments, labelled energetic experimenters, harmonious
483 enjoyers, normative carers, conscious experts and rationalists. These clusters are assumed to be
484 discrete, with no overlapping membership, and people's behaviour can then be 'read off' from their
485 stated motivation. So, for example, attitudes to ready-meals were generally rather negative among
486 all groups, with the energetic experimenters and conscious experts showing significantly more
487 positive attitudes than those in other clusters.

488 Commenting on the nutritional value of convenience food, Ahlgren et al. (2004: 160) suggest
489 that ready-meals are usually found to contain too much fat and too little energy to meet the
490 nutritional needs of healthy adults. These characteristics help explain why their survey respondents
491 held negative beliefs about frequent consumers of ready-meals. As reported earlier, an analysis of
492 the nutritional content of 100 ready meals purchased from three UK supermarkets found that none
493 of the meals fully complied with WHO dietary guidelines (Howard et al. 2012). However, the same
494 study also explored the nutritional content of recipes cooked or recommended by TV celebrity chefs.
495 These were found to be of even poorer nutritional content than ready-meals in terms of fibre
496 density, carbohydrate and fat content but better in terms of sodium density, excluding salt added

[24] Geeroms et al. (2008) understood ready-meals as 'complete meals that require few or no extra ingredients, prepared by external procedures and designed to fully and speedily replace – at home – the main course of a home-made main meal' (p. 704) and differentiated between six categories of ready meals: 'frozen, hydrated, canned, bottled, fresh from supermarket and fresh from delicatessen' (p. 707).

after cooking for seasoning.[25] The salt content of UK ready-meals remains high but was reported to have been reduced by 45% in the four years since a survey by the Food Standards Agency in 2003. Some dishes still contained >3g per portion which is more than half an adult's maximum daily recommended intake (FSA 2003, Consensus Action on Salt and Health 2007). Meanwhile, the adverse dietary consequences of convenience food are explored by Dixon et al. (2006) who make a direct link between the consumption of such foods and increased rates of obesity and over-weight. An attitudinal study of over 1000 Swiss consumers also reported that overweight adults (BMI >25) are more positive about the nutrient and vitamin content of ready-meals than 'normal weight' adults (van der Horst et al. 2010).

As the previous reference to Warde's (1997) culinary antinomies suggests, consumers often make trade-offs between the perceived benefits and drawbacks of different kinds of food. Based on the use of consumer value maps comparing attitudes towards home-made meals, take-out food and eating out (as general 'meal solutions') and specific types of ready-meal (such as frozen pizza and chilled hot-pot), Costa et al. (2007) report how Dutch consumers trade off perceived sensory and health-related benefits with a range of convenience features associated with the acquisition, storage, time-saving and stress-avoidance aspects of ready-meals.

Environment, sustainability and waste

Environmental issues receive much less attention in the literature on convenience food than health-related issues. Consumers are reported to place little emphasis on environmental and sustainability issues when making their purchasing decisions (Defra 2012b: 3.8).[26] One recent report by the

[25] This finding challenges the view that switching from convenience food to home cooking will inevitably lead to improved nutrition.

[26] A 2012 survey of >2000 UK adults similarly found that the environmental impact of food ranked lowest in terms of the importance that consumers attached to a list of twelve factors when shopping for food. The highest ranked were taste (96%), quality (95%) and price (93%). Environmental factors were considered important by 53% of respondents (Which? 2013: 21).

518 Consumers' Association in association with the UK Government Office for Science goes further,
519 arguing that, while many consumers could make a link between food and health, few had much
520 knowledge of where their food comes from or how it is produced. Put more bluntly, participants in
521 this public dialogue were said to have been 'shocked to hear about the impact of food production on
522 climate change, the environment and water shortages' (Which? 2015: 3). 'Convenience' was
523 frequently cited as a key issue for participants as few considered that they had the time (and in
524 some cases the skills) to cook all their meals from scratch every day. Rather, food needed to fit into
525 their lifestyles with food choices reflecting the time available to shop and/or to prepare meals (ibid.:
526 16).

527 Defra's Sustainable Consumption Report highlights the difficulties in agreeing what
528 constitutes a sustainable healthy diet, asking what such diets might look like in practice and how far
529 they align with current eating patterns (2013: 14). The report acknowledges that sustainability is an
530 elusive term combining social, environmental and economic aspects and that much food-related
531 behaviour is not based on rational choice (ibid.: 23). The main exception to the general finding that
532 sustainability issues are rarely mentioned in connection with convenience food is the link consumers
533 sometimes make between convenience and waste (particularly in relation to food packaging and the
534 energy demands of producing, processing and preparing convenience food).[27] Defra's Food
535 Synthesis Review concluded that the evidence on the sustainability impacts of consumer food
536 behaviours was 'still emerging' (2009: 1). The independent Institute for Applied Ecology in Germany
537 recently tested the CO_2 emissions of five different frozen foods (rolls, peas, chicken ragout with rice,
538 pepperoni pizza and hash browns) and compared them with a home-cooked and a chilled version of
539 the same products. It concluded that there was no significant difference between their respective
540 carbon footprints (Öko-Institut e.V. 2012). A Swiss study concluded that the (aluminium) packaging

[27] Not all food packaging is wasteful, of course, as appropriate packaging can reduce waste by increasing a product's shelf-life. Recent innovations such as multi-portion/split packs and re-sealable bags have been introduced in an attempt to reduce food waste (Packaging News, 4 March 2013). For an assessment of different methods for waste minimization in the convenience food industry, see Darlington et al. (2009).

of lasagne ready-meals had a lower environmental impact (in terms of CO_2 emissions) than the energy invested during the production process and during the storage and preparation of food by consumers (Büsser & Jungbluth 2009). Yet, these 'food-climate balance reports' are based on very specific, and not necessarily realistic, experimental settings. By increasing the storage time of the frozen lasagne, for instance, from one month to one year, the product's energy balance increased by 260% (ibid.: 14). Furthermore, even if the sustainability impacts of food choice are known and there is a willingness to engage in more sustainable consumption practices, many other factors seem to be prioritised by consumers. For example, Defra's Food Synthesis Review cites a 2008 TNS Omnibus survey that showed that when purchasing food, consumers spontaneously rated price (51%) and quality (39%) far ahead of environmental factors such as 'food miles' (4%), packaging (3%), sustainability (2%) and impact on landscape or wildlife (2%).

Reflecting on the difficulties in judging the environmental costs of different kinds of behaviours, Warde et al. conclude that 'When it comes to considering environmental impacts we should be sensitive to those devices which might eliminate the need for travel … for example home shopping, working from home, home delivery services and so forth' (1998, no pagination). It is also significant that control over time and space and the coordination of different tasks is what Warde et al. call a key late-modern marker of privilege with important environmental consequences because of the inherent tendency to further ratchet up demand for more goods and services. Warde et al. also explore the environmental implications of prioritising convenience including its effect on the spread of consumer durables and the rate at which older technologies are replaced, all of which have implications for energy demand (see also Botonaki & Mattas 2010, Brunner 2014).

Convenience as practice

Having undertaken an extensive review of the literature on convenience food, from a wide range of theoretical perspectives, we wish to propose an alternative way of framing the subject by

566 approaching convenience food through a 'theories of practice' lens. The approach is outlined in
567 general by Reckwitz (2002) and in the context of consumption research by Warde (2005) -- see also
568 Delormier et al. (2009) and Everts et al. (2011). By focusing on specific practices (such as shopping,
569 cooking and eating), the approach offers an alternative to the way 'convenience' food is reified in
570 much of the literature, conflating distinct activities that would benefit from more careful
571 conceptualization and closer empirical scrutiny.

572 In formal terms, a practice can be defined as a routinized type of behaviour which consists of
573 bodily activities, forms of mental activity, material things and their use, background knowledge and
574 forms of understanding, 'know-how', states of emotion and motivational knowledge (Reckwitz 2002:
575 249). Practices are constituted through a nexus of 'doings and sayings' (Schatzki 2002), becoming
576 routinized in repetitive performances that are guided by models of appropriate conduct but which
577 are always subject to improvisation. Though some practice theorists might disagree, Warde (2016)
578 argues that the theory emphasises doing over thinking, practical competence over strategic
579 reasoning, mutual intelligibility over personal motivation and body over mind. Rejecting the primacy
580 of individual agency or social structures, practice theorists take *practices* as the unit of analysis.
581 Practices can be understood at the level of performance (such as the practice of eating a meal) or as
582 entities, where the compound character of practices such as eating becomes evident through their
583 tendency to become embedded within a complex of other practices and arrangements (such as car-
584 borne travel and supermarket shopping and the socio-technical apparatus of refrigeration and
585 microwave cooking). Practice theorists also emphasise the way practices become routinized as part
586 of everyday life, performed in a habitual manner rather than being subject to constant reflection and
587 self-conscious deliberation.

588 Such an approach can be used to account for the way convenience food has been taken up
589 as part of consumers' everyday lives, relying on complex socio-technical systems, elaborate
590 manufacturing and retail infrastructure, and skilful consumers with the competence to use these
591 complex arrangements as part of their dietary routines. Viewed through a practice-theory lens, the

popularity of convenience food suggests that it has a good 'fit' with the routines and rhythms of consumers' other food-related practices and with the often-competing demands of their working, family and leisure commitments. The consumption of convenience food is also clearly associated with particular emotional states and motivational knowledge such as those associated with 'feeding the family' under conditions that are often time-pressed and harried, involving competing social schedules and the orchestration of complex domestic routines.

With its emphasis on convention, habit and routine, practice theories place little emphasis on individual choice, emphasising how 'choices' are embedded within the contingent settings of social life. Practice theory therefore has important implications for current thinking about behaviour change and the model of 'informed choice' on which it is based. This might be seen as a significant advantage of theories of practice over other approaches which place more emphasis on consumers' expressed intentions or reported behaviour. Practice theory focuses, instead, on the way individual 'choices' are caught up in wider routines and habitual behaviours. For, as Stieß and Rubik argue in the context of climate change mitigation, 'because these routines are being carried out habitually, they are almost completely inaccessible for cognitive approaches or reflexion' (Stieß & Rubik 2015: 39). Rather, any change towards more sustainable or healthier modes of consumption must be approached in a more systemic way *at the level of practice* rather than in terms of the individuals who carry out those practices. Applied to convenience food, one might probe the 'stocks of knowledge' and the actual social practices that consumers use to incorporate particular kinds of food (or combinations of food) into their everyday lives rather than berating them for their poor dietary choices.[28]

Adopting a theories of practice approach, Halkier demonstrates how the use of convenience food 'is embedded in the complex practices, processes and conditions of … everyday life' (2013: 123). Rather than taking a normative approach which frames convenience food as an inferior or

[28] See Meah and Watson (2011) for a similar approach, applied to the study of domestic cooking or Evans (2011) for a study of the domestic practices that contribute to the generation of household food waste.

problematic category in nutritional or environmental terms, Halkier suggests that research should focus on the way convenience food is *used, appropriated and made sense of* in everyday life (ibid.: 126, emphasis added). From this perspective, she suggests, understanding convenience food might be reframed in terms of its relation to a range of other social practices such as parenting, transportation, socialising, relationships and health. Any interventions, designed to increase the health or sustainability of convenience food, would need to address this wider nexus of social practices, as well as understanding what Halkier calls the 'do-ability' of consumer practices (ibid.: 130), understood in terms of what is technically possible and what is culturally appropriate (cf. Prim et al. 2007).

Despite its emphasis on routinization and habituation, practice theory also attends to the way people are recruited to new practices and how long-established practices gradually fall out of favour. From this perspective, the dynamics of social practice can be seen as the accumulation of many small-scale changes (cf. Shove et al. 2012). Rather than emphasising the role of individual agency, however, practice theorists emphasise the role of the social environment in supporting change (via an emphasis on context, setting and situation). From a practice-theory perspective, dietary change and the adoption of new culinary practices are likely to occur through a process of gradual accumulation and steady sedimentation (as consumers adopt new practices and abandon older ones) rather than through rapid innovation or sudden transformation. Where change has been relatively rapid, as with the widespread adoption of convenience food across Europe and North America, practice theorists would seek to understand how such novel practices 'fit' the circumstances of people's everyday lives, providing a culturally acceptable and technically feasible 'solution' to their current situation.

Above all, however, practice theory supports the need for a better understanding of the social practices, codes and conventions through which convenience foods are made meaningful – how they are appropriated and used in everyday life. Such an approach would explore the 'stocks of knowledge' with which consumers make sense of their food-related practices – as we plan to do in

642 the next phase of our current project, undertaking ethnographic observation, shopping 'go-alongs'
643 and kitchen visits with a diverse range of households in the UK and Germany to ascertain the way
644 convenience foods are adopted as part of people's everyday consumption practices.

645 Finally, a theories of practice approach sheds further light on the nature of convenience food
646 as part of the compound practice of eating, acknowledging the way its consumption involves the
647 coordination and integration of many other practices. Extending Warde's (2013) argument about
648 eating in general to the consumption of convenience food in particular, it is clear that it involves the
649 integration of several other practices including the supplying and cooking of food, the organization
650 of meals and aesthetic judgements of taste – each of which has its own autonomous logic and
651 coordinating agents. Paraphrasing Warde, eating is a composite or compound practice: a matter of
652 cultural convention rather than official regulation or enforcement, occurring mostly in private, being
653 weakly organized, with limited coordination. This lack of central coordination, weak organization
654 and low-level regulation may help explain why cooking practices (in general) and convenience food
655 (in particular) have been subject to such strong moralization (see also Warde, in press).

656

657 ## Conclusion

658 This paper has provided a critical review of recent work on convenience food as a contested cultural
659 category. The evidence shows that convenience foods cover a wide range of products and practices,
660 and that the category itself is a chaotic conception in the terms outlined by Sayer (1992). Rather
661 than attempting to generate a single definition of convenience food, this paper has sought to
662 characterize the place of this complex and contested food category within the structure of the
663 contemporary food market and within the context of consumers' everyday social practices. Our
664 review confirms Halkier's (2013) argument that the contrast between 'home-made' and
665 'convenience' food is easily overdrawn as consumers frequently combine different kinds of food and
666 different cooking and eating practices.

Having undertaken a review of the literature, we have proposed a 'reframing' of convenience food, using a 'theories of practice' approach to emphasise its socially embedded character and the complex socio-technical arrangements that constrain and enable its adoption as part of consumers' everyday lives. More generally, this review has highlighted the importance of context and contingency in understanding convenience food including the social significance of domestic routines and the 'do-ability' of culinary innovation, in terms of what is technically possible, socially and economically feasible and culturally appropriate. The commercial success of convenience food can, we argue, be explained in these terms as 'fitting in' with consumers' domestic routines and with their ways of 'making sense' of their busy lives, as well as being technically feasible (through innovations in industrial and domestic technologies) and practically possible (through changes in food retailing and supermarket shopping).

Finally, building on sociological insights from Warde (1997), we have attended to the moralization of convenience food, refusing to accept that 'convenience' and 'care' are mutually exclusive or dichotomous categories. For there is ample evidence in the studies reviewed here that the use of (some kinds of) convenience food can (in some circumstances) be an expression of care within families rather than indicating a dereliction of parental responsibility or an absence of care. The moralization of convenience food is, we suggest, a major obstacle in understanding the social dynamics of contemporary food consumption and a significant barrier in attempts to pursue a healthier, more sustainable, diet. Reframing our understanding of the place of convenience food within the social practices of everyday life represents an alternative way forward, avoiding many of pitfalls that have beset existing studies.

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