

WP 3: Food Anxieties and Consumer Practices

This work package challenges the alleged decline of everyday cooking skills which has become a common part of public and policy discourse.

Aims and Methods:

This project

- Focuses on **everyday kitchen practices** and how individuals manage different sources of information about the range of foods available (what to buy, from where; how to store, cook and dispose of food).
- Examines the significance of a variety of **technological innovations** (including fridges, freezers and microwaves) and asks how they have been integrated into household practices during different historical periods and with what effect.
- Explores patterns of **continuity and change** in how cooking knowledge and skills have been passed down, adapted or rejected by different generations within the same family.

We also look at the impact that **key life-course transitions** (such as leaving home, partnering, parenthood, separation or bereavement) have on individuals' domestic practices.

The project combines **focus groups and interviews** with **ethnographic and visual methods** including shopping 'go-alongs', guided kitchen tours and videoed meal preparation to explore patterns of continuity and change in families' kitchen practices over three generations. Images from the household studies can be found at: <http://www.flickr.com/photos/52548860@N08/>



Findings:

- Our data challenge assumptions that **previous generations** were better and more careful cooks than people today.
- People who are good cooks often take **shortcuts** for the sake of time and convenience, for example when they have young children, or due to long working hours but this does not mean that they have become 'deskilled' or 'lazy'.
- **Men** are increasingly interested and active participants in cooking, mainly as a leisure activity, and this is often seen as an opportunity to demonstrate flair and skill.
- While men are more involved in cooking than earlier generations, this does not necessarily mean that **women and men** are more equal in the kitchen – men mainly cook when they want to and their involvement in the kitchen is often experienced as challenging for women, sometimes creating more work.
- People care about **where food comes from**. They express a range of concerns including food safety, animal welfare, the livelihoods of both local (British) and more distant farmers, and concerns about sustainability and the environmental impact.
- Caring about these issues is not always reflected in the food that people actually buy. Wider **ethical concerns** are **traded off** against other issues such as cost, the tastes and preferences of different household members, and the need to fit shopping and cooking into people's other everyday commitments and responsibilities.
- People are concerned about **food waste** and many feel torn between competing messages not to throw food away unnecessarily while also being careful not to eat food which is past its 'use-by' date.



Key Publications:

Meah, A. and Watson, M. (2011) Saints and Slackers: Challenging Discourses about the Decline of Domestic Cooking. *Sociological Research Online* 16(2) 6.