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‘When I’m doing a dinner party I don’t go for the Tesco cheeses, it’s that sort of level, you know’: Class distinctions, friendship and home entertaining.

Abstract

The purpose of this article is to explore how friendships are ‘done’ through processes of eating together formally within the British context, paying attention to how taste is displayed through food. Existing research on food consumption and social differentiation has in the main concentrated on eating out (Warde and Martens 2000), but there is little research on entertaining inside the home. Based on qualitative interviews with middle class couples at different stages of the lifecourse in the north of England, we use one example of home entertaining – the dinner party – to analyse how middle class social networks are maintained and extended. For these families, the dinner party is an important site in which friendship is done through shared class boundary making, drawing of distinctions and social closure. Using a Bourdieusian theoretical framework, we indicate how home entertaining facilitates the conversion of social networks into cultural capital to perpetuate class privilege.

Key words: class; friendship; food; taste; Bourdieu, UK.

Biography

Dr Jody Mellor joined the 'Changing Families, Changing Food' programme at the University of Sheffield in 2007. She has recently completed an ESRC funded PhD thesis at the Centre for Women's Studies, University of York, which explored the intersections between class and faith for working-class British Muslim and non-Muslim women.

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Lucy Crane is currently writing up her PhD thesis, funded by the Leverhulme Trust, which focuses on the social relations between families and food, looking specifically at locations within the UK and Hungary. Lucy has been a recipient of the Excellence Exchange Scheme to visit the University of Szeged in Hungary in 2007.

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Introduction

In the last few decades, British creative works¹ have emphasised home entertaining as a central part of middle-class contemporary culture. Perhaps the most well-known depiction of entertaining in the home, *Abigail's Party*, by Mike Leigh (1979) is a well-known satirical play based on a small cocktail party hosted by an upwardly mobile couple during 1970s Britain. By exploring themes of social tensions, snobbery, class aspirations and 'taste' it evokes embarrassment and shame for middle-class observers (Brottman 2007). Everything associated with the central character, Beverly, is 'loud, fake and clashing in the most garish 70s style' (Brottman 2007: 318), including her attire, the home décor as well as the food served at the gathering. Home entertaining also featured prominently in the popular BBC television sit-com of the 1990s, *Keeping Up Appearances*. Audience amusement centred upon the pretension of the central character, Hyacinth Bucket, who attempted to maintain her inclusion within the middle-class social circle. Scenes revolved around next-door neighbour Elizabeth Warden's anxiety surrounding her daily visits for coffee at the "Bucket Residence" and Hyacinth's frequent plans for 'candlelight suppers'. Hyacinth goes to extraordinary lengths to uphold this class masquerade, her machinations an attempt to mask her links to her unrespectable, working-class relatives when they show up, exactly at the wrong time.

Both these cultural productions have been very successful in the UK, precisely because these sit-com women entertainingly 'slip up'. When people are 'revealed' as inauthentic they become a joke; as Lawler (1999) notes, people who are accused of being pretentious are those 'in whom what they *seem to be* is not (considered to be) what they *are*...in whom there is a gap between *being* and *seeming*' (Lawler 1999: 17). Indeed, critics of *Abigail's Party* expressed ethical concerns about the kinds of audience sentiments the play induced,

suggesting that the work represented a disdain of and contempt for the ambitions and tastes of upwardly mobile working-class people (Potter, cited in Brottman 2007).

Partly because of the attention from British cultural works, dinner parties have become highly symbolic of middle-class England, which both reflects the attitudes of the British middle-class as well as contributing to the production of middle-class practices in the UK. According to Colquhoun (2007), there is a history of dinner parties in the UK going back to the Victorian era for the middle classes and much further for the very wealthy. Previous scholarship has indicated that food is a site in which identity is ‘done’ (Lupton 1994) and for middle class people, food plays an important role in the maintenance of friendship (Warde and Martens 2000). Yet, with the exception of Hunt’s (1991) anthropological research on friendship, class and home entertaining, dinner parties have been the object of very few academic discussions. Considering the current growing attention placed on food in general and dinner parties specifically, this mode of home entertaining deserves further examination.

The people we spoke to engage in many types of social gathering with friends involving eating – for instance, parties, barbeques, celebrations for birthdays and Christmas’s, ‘popping round’ for tea and cakes, as well as eating out for lunch or dinner – but dinner parties were chosen as a focus for this paper because they were the object of a large amount of discussion within the interviews and because they occurred much more frequently than the other events. Though we spoke to both men and women about their experiences of home entertaining, this paper relies on the accounts of the women much more than those of the men, because as the main organisers of dinner parties, women’s accounts were much longer and contained much more detail than those of the men we interviewed.

The formality of dinner parties distinguished this mode of home entertaining with other events in middle class houses. Dinner parties were seen as evening occasions – usually a Saturday – and invariably were without children. Dinner parties were also characterised by the intimacy of the event; most considered that for a sit-down meal of several courses, there was space for one, two or three couples only. If more guests were invited, a less formal party-style buffet meal was deemed more appropriate. Most interview participants hosted and attended dinner parties frequently, though this varied between two or three times a year (for Amanda and Chris) to up to once every month (for Vicky, Silvia and Karen), and some couples told us they hosted dinner parties more frequently in the summer months. However, with the exception of Germaine and recently retired Silvia – who host large dinner parties every couple of months – most of the women over 60 (i.e. those who participated in the oral history interviews) did not formally entertain in the home, preferring to share cake and tea informally or to eat out with friends for lunch.

To elaborate, we look at previous research and scholarship on class capitals, class practices and how these concepts can be used to explore food consumption, and in particular, the dinner party. Though the emphasis of class has traditionally been placed upon economic capital, the emphasis here is on class distinctions based on cultural and social capital. After briefly discussing the methodological framework underpinning this project, we explore how social and cultural capitals were deployed when hosting dinner parties and how class influenced the form that friendship took for the people we interviewed. This article explores how the display of cultural competence during dinner parties was intimately connected to how couples ‘did’ friendships. We found that having people to dinner was particularly significant and served many functions in relation to the perpetuation of class privilege.

Friendship, Class Capitals and Culinary Distinctions

For Giddens (1992), friendship is regarded as a kind of ‘pure relationship’ that transcends traditional material or social ties. Though there is a lack of research on friendship and class, the empirical research that does exist refutes Giddens’ claim, and suggests that class is important to how friends are chosen and how class inequalities are maintained on an individual and structural level (Walker 1995; Allan 1998a). Recent sociological research suggests that friendship is a ‘social glue’, significant to broader structural inequalities within society (Spencer and Pahl 2006: 1). Friendships do not simply arise ‘naturally’ but are personal and social relationships, influenced by the contexts under which they are constructed (Allan 1998a). Cultural understandings of what friendship entails and how it is practiced are intertwined with the economic, social and cultural resources to which individuals have access (Allan 1998b). In particular, the norms and activities that friends share are ‘closely related to material conditions’ (Walker 1995: 276). Focusing on contemporary society, Walker (1995) suggests that the working class and middle class people she interviewed had diverse notions of what friendship entailed. Whereas working class respondents relied on friends for material support (e.g. help with childcare and building work), middle class people expected emotional support and shared leisure activities with friends. The practice of dining out with friends was the focus of Warde and Martens’ (2000) research but there is little known about social differentiation and entertaining *within* the home.

The importance of identity has been highlighted by social research on friendship (Brooks 2005; Harrison 1998). Friends ‘affirm their own position, cement their status and give substance to their identities’ (Allan 1998a: 693-4). According to O’Connor (1998), friendship offers a ‘way of inventing and re-inventing the self in an authentic way throughout one’s life’

(O'Connor 1998: 118). For Walker's respondents, friendship involved the 'accumulation and display of cultural capital' which 'helped to reaffirm the respondents' location in the middle-class' (Walker 1995: 288-289). Not only does class position influence the form that friendship takes, the social networks to which people have access are influenced by, and have a significant impact, upon individuals' life chances (Brook 2003). In recent years, the concept of social capital has received considerable attention in the social and political sciences. Despite the growing interest in social capital theories, many have failed to acknowledge that social capital is class segregated or have left this point underdeveloped (Li et al. 2003). However, researchers utilising Bourdieu's conceptual framework have placed attention upon how social, economic and cultural capitals are central to the maintenance of class structures and how these mechanisms are deployed in everyday life (Devine 2004; Ball 2003). Unequal access to these resources differentiates social groups, maintaining inequalities by perpetuating their closed nature. Ball (2003) has indicated how working class and middle class families have access to different types of social networks and make use of these in diverse ways. According to Ball (2003), the perpetuation of middle class privilege through the lifecourse is related to social resources available to this group. For instance, those who have attended high-achieving schools and who have widened their networks through membership of elite associations are able to develop networks of valuable 'weak' and 'strong' ties who are available to offer assistance at key moments. In this way, social, cultural and economic capitals are interrelated, allowing for the conversion of economic capital into cultural and social capital, and vice versa (Ball 2003; Devine 2004).

In a similar way to social capital, Emmison (2003) suggests that cultural competence remains a 'restricted commodity, largely the preserve of the professional and managerial classes' (Emmison 2003: 227). Despite this, class inequalities have been sidelined in recent work on

consumption; instead, cultural identities, fluidity and choice have been brought to the fore. Of the few works on the sociology of consumption that have addressed class, most have focussed on the arts, such as classical music appreciation or museum attendance, for instance. As Johnston and Baumann claim, research on cultural capital has tended to ‘neglect the banal concerns of everyday life, like eating and drinking’ (2007: 196), but similar to other cultural forms, ‘cuisine is a cultural realm where individuals can effectively engage in status displays’ (Johnston and Baumann 2007: 168).

Although a number of theorists argue that elite cultural tastes in contemporary society have moved away from the narrow preference for haute cuisine in Bourdieu’s France in the 1960s, this is an indication that preferences have not been abolished but have broadened. Instead of the traditional high/low status divides, people now signal high status by enjoying a range of cultures across the hierarchy. Though the cultural omnivore thesis could be seen as discrediting the contemporary application of Bourdieu’s analysis of taste, cultural consumption theorists indicate that this is not the case (Emmison 2003; Johnston and Baumann 2007). Emmison (2003) argues that ‘cultural mobility’, which is ‘the ability to move at will between cultural realms, a freedom to choose where one is positioned in the cultural landscape’, is ‘premised upon an unequal, class-related distribution in cultural competence’ (Emmison 2003: 211).

The emphasis on fresh, expensive ingredients has been found by Bugge (2003) in her analysis of cookbooks and tv cookery programmes in Norway since the 1990s. Despite seemingly democratic choices, such dishes require access to economic resources and as such are ‘primarily accessible to cosmopolitan, upper-middle-class individuals with ample grocery budgets who are capable of extensive global travel’ (Johnston and Baumann 2007: 188).

Based on an analysis of gourmet food journalism in the US, Johnston and Baumann (2007) argue that in contemporary America, there has been a move away from explicit ‘food snobbism’; French cuisine is no longer considered to be the only form of ‘good’ food and instead, food is legitimated as tasteful when it is framed as either authentic or exotic. Exotic foods were valorised by gourmet food journalists; articles discussed ‘food that is exciting, outrageous, inappropriate, daring’ (Johnston and Baumann 2007: 192) and focussed on very unusual or unknown dishes and ingredients; food which is not easily available or obscure was particularly praised. Bugge (2003) suggests that as an appreciation for ‘exotic’ foods has become widespread – for middle class groups losing their appeal once they ‘become an indistinguishable dish or a pub lunch’ – local foods have once more regained popularity (Bugge 2003: 7). ‘Authentic’ foods are legitimated as such, according to Johnson and Baumann (2007), through images which feature local produce and foods which are close to nature. They argue that production on a small-scale is represented as ‘morally superior to industrial processes...depicted as driven by non-commercial, moral motivations like a sense of duty, a love of farming, and a desire to provide for others’ (2007: 182 – 3). In particular, personal connections, historicism and simplicity signal authenticity by letting the reader know that this food is valuable in part because of its ‘specific geographic origins, which sets it apart from more generic versions’ (Johnson and Baumann 2007: 180). According to them, authentic foods are:

...seemingly “simple” foods that come from highly specific places off the middle-class tourist path, they are produced by hard-working rural people with non-commercial motivations, they have ties to specific personalities and culinary artists (especially in wealthy settings), they have a rich history, and they are consumed in casual, “simple” settings.’ (Johnson and Baumann 2007: 187)

As many sociologists utilising Bourdieu's theoretical framework (Skeggs 2004; Lawler 2005) have noted, class distinctions operate primarily around cultural capital – and specifically 'taste' – rather than on material resources. Knowledge about 'tasteful' foods also requires high-level cultural knowledge, keeping ahead of trends which change frequently. As Wright et al. (2001) note, 'ingredients such as balsamic vinegar or sundried tomatoes now move with such dizzying speed from expensive restaurants to crisp flavourings' (2001: 354). A key aspect to class divisions, emphasised by Lawler (2005), is their relational nature. By producing working class existence as tasteless and disgusting, middle class lifestyles are framed as desirable. Middle class identities, she suggests, 'rely on *not* being the repellent and disgusting "other"' (2005: 431). This middle class disgust is based not on the absence of economic resources, but on a lack of 'taste'.

Finding Out

Data – in two parts – was gathered as part of a larger research project concerning food and families in West Yorkshire, UK and Southern Hungary, which is funded through the Leverhulme Trust. Using qualitative research methods, this paper explores the data arising from the British data, based on the accounts of 47 British individuals at all stages of the life course. All the participants lived on the edge of the Bradford/Leeds metropolitan area in the North of England, in a small town which has become renowned for its high-performing schools and rising house prices. Although not all were born into the middle class, everyone we spoke to now occupied middle-class positions, though there were differences between income, education and profession within the sample.²

We conducted one-to-one, semi-structured interviews with 11 family members in eight households. Most of these respondents were middle-aged, lived with a partner and had children under 18, though two of the women were in their early thirties and were not mothers (and one of these women was single). We interviewed participants up to three times and interviews were around an hour in length. The interview participants were asked about the role of food in their family and in their everyday life. We also asked them whether they entertained. In addition, we conducted life history interviews with members of a women's organisation. We spoke to 36 women, most of whom were over 60 and retired. These interviews lasted around 90 minutes and though their format was unstructured and focussed on the life course generally, towards the end of the interview the women were briefly asked about community participation, friendship and housework.

The Display of Cultural Capital

The food served to guests was the central concern for those to whom we talked. Though no one set a budget limit on dinner party expenditure and many bought very expensive food, the cost *per se* was largely unimportant to organising what was deemed a successful dinner party meal. Instead, class distinctions were drawn through strong cultural preferences relating to the type of food served and the general atmosphere of the evening. As Johnston and Baumann (2007) indicate, overt class distinctions have been displaced by more subtle processes in recent years. Those we interviewed made elaborate and lengthy preparations, aiming to create an evening that was cultured, refined and pleasant. Central to the evening was in particular, the quality of the ingredients.

Providing food deemed appropriate for home entertaining involved shopping at some stores whilst avoiding others. Food was available for purchase from a wide range of retailers including the national superstore, Tesco, and also a wide range of small independent retailers. However, the only national chain represented within the area was Tesco.³ However, those to whom we spoke emphasised that central to an evening's entertaining was high-quality food. Regardless of the price, people avoided Tesco goods when hosting dinner parties because Tesco own-brand products were associated with a low-quality that did not correspond with their notions of an ideal meal for friends. Whilst it was considered acceptable to purchase some minor ingredients from high street stores, shops such as Tesco were deemed inappropriate for the main ingredients of a dish to be served at dinner parties. Vicky, whose words form the title of this paper, emphasised her lack of knowledge of produce sold at Tesco and in doing so, defined herself in relation to where she does not shop:

Doing the dinner party situation I like to sort of go upmarket with some things like cheese and... I'm trying to think, fish, I wouldn't go to the fish counter at Tesco for example, I wouldn't go to the meat counter. Do they have a meat counter at Tesco? I wouldn't go there. (Vicky)

Regardless of whether or not the guests knew where the food was purchased, most people we interviewed preferred to shop at independent or local stores in preparation for dinner parties, where they could buy produce thought to be of superior quality. As Johnston and Baumann (2007) argue, food is legitimated as tasteful when it is framed as authentic, and for those to whom we spoke, specialist or independent shops were popular because they were seen to provide food produced on a small-scale, and made available unusual or obscure produce which was not available to a Tesco's one-stop mass market. Many interviewees were uneasy

about the corporate power and ethical practice of Tesco, voicing concern about Tesco's negative influence on smaller shops in the town. Representations of authenticity were attached to fair-trade, locally sourced or organic produce and as such, food bought from small, independently run stores was considered more valuable in part because of the cultural capital attached to ethical consumerism.

In addition to where the food was purchased, attention was paid to meal preparation. All agreed that the food served at dinner parties should be of the highest quality. There was a preference for adventurous or unusual dishes, unavailable to the mass market. For instance, Chris recalled a few dishes his partner and himself served at dinner parties recently, including '*pork with three mustards*', '*a very nice chocolate meringue roulade*' and '*plums and figs in honeycomb*'. Interviewees emphasised that the dishes prepared displayed their individual flair, creativity and good taste. Dishes were often described as 'fiddly': for instance, Karen tells us that her guests enjoyed '*the roast beef [recipe], I think it's a Jamie Oliver, and it's a fillet of beef, wrapped in Puccini mushrooms and salted, with a Parma ham around it, so you wrap it all up and it's quite fiddly but that is absolutely gorgeous*'. Those participating in hosting and attending dinner parties had the cultural knowledge considered essential to successfully organise a formal meal for several guests. Germaine, for instance, expressed feelings of confidence that she was able to organise an Italian-themed dinner party because '*when we were in Italy we, [husband] and I, did an Italian cookery course*'. Many saw cooking for dinner parties as an opportunity for friends to sample a recipe or flavour they had never previously served before, for instance, for Karen to '*try new things or do really special foods, make your own soup, that kind of thing*'.

As a contrast to ‘every day’ meals during week-days for household family members – which placed an emphasis on shopping and cooking quickly – all agreed that preparations for dinner parties should be time-intensive and luxurious. For instance, for Kathleen, ‘*The best cooking I do is when we’re having visitors. Otherwise it’s, it’s survival*’. When there was enough time to prepare for the evening, most reported that planning, shopping and cooking for dinner parties was enjoyable. Intensive preparation went into planning dinner parties: usually the meal consists of four (or more) courses, including an appetiser, starter, main meal and dessert, plus coffee.

Despite dominant representations of French cuisine as the traditional elite food, no participants mentioned French food in the accounts at all. As Emmison (2003) suggests, elitism is no longer indicated by the traditional high/low status divides, but instead by a ‘cultural mobility’, an appreciation of a range of cultures across the hierarchy. Some to whom we spoke avoided such food ‘snobbism’, and instead, demonstrated good taste by preparing ‘simple’ yet tasteful and classic dishes. For instance, Bethany ‘*might do something simple like a pasta but you know full of olives at the start and some dipping bread*’. She aimed to create a laid-back environment, and despite her ‘backstage’ anxiety and effort, described her dinner parties as ‘*a relaxed evening. Don’t make it ultra posh, just a little bit spontaneous, “just come round for supper”*’.

These accounts – in this case, of hosting and attending dinner parties – were based on shared understandings of what constituted middle-class identities (and what did not) and their attempts to forge identities that relied on not being the ‘tasteless’ ‘other’ (Lawler 2005). Some women drew distinctions between their own practices of hosting dinner parties and those of their friends’. Vicky demonstrated an element of competition with her peers in her

discussion about her practice of recording what she has previously served at dinner parties in case she accidentally repeats ‘menus’ with the same guests:

I mean I don't mind if I go to somebody's house, I probably wouldn't remember anyway if I had it [meal] before or not. It doesn't bother me in the slightest but I just didn't want to, you know, repeat it [...] But talking to other friends I know some just did not do that sort of thing, if they liked a dish they would you know, use that dish even if they used it before or whatever they felt comfortable making at the time. But... (Vicky)

Because of the demands of hosting dinner parties, accounts of ‘taste’ in the main centred upon hosting rather than attending these events. However, there were also expectations placed on the conduct of guests: in particular, Bethany indicated that not eating the food served was particularly embarrassing and offensive. Though it might cause her considerable discomfort, she makes sure her plate is empty:

I was always told you just, erm, you never ever show that a, you don't like it [food served] and b, you've had too much. Take a bite of small pieces off and swallow them whole if necessary, that's what I was taught. So as not to offend. (Bethany)

Through emphasising her own respectable upbringing which – according to her – included the transmission of the ‘correct’ table etiquette (‘*that's what I was taught*’), Bethany’s account draws an implicit distinction between her own conduct as a guest and the faulty habitus of others.

Food was an important marker of identity and social position. Hosting within the home was a lifestyle showcase, particularly for the women we interviewed, some of whom explicitly described dinner parties as a ‘performance’. The identities of wives, mothers and friends were ‘displayed’ (Finch 2007) through notions of taste. Hosting – and to a certain extent, attending – these events provided the opportunity to display good taste. If successful, entertaining confirmed couples’, and especially women’s, middle class identities. However, many women we interviewed expressed feelings of considerable anxiety about the failure of these displays, about not getting it ‘right’. Kathleen saw dinner parties as an ‘ordeal’ to avoid altogether and though Bethany considered herself an experienced cook, she had concerns about the meal turning ‘pear shape’ under pressure. Many of these women who expressed strong anxieties about hosting successful dinner parties grew up in working class families as children, though as adults, occupied middle class positions. For instance, Silvia indicated that her childhood memories of awkwardness and embarrassment about the lack of food are related to her practice of providing (too much) high quality, well-prepared food for guests:

Silvia: I still get wound up. [JM: If the food’s not right?] Yes. And if I think I might run out. So I’ve got to have more than, and then you end up with a load of food that’s left. [...] So you’d think after all these years... (Silvia)

Silvia’s account indicates the permeable character of the habitus, which is manifested in complex and diverse ways. Silvia has a ‘disrupted habitus’ (Lawler 1999); she has ‘moved’ from the working class positions in which she was born, but her memories relating to her experiences of food as a child remain.

The success of the evening was a reflection of the women's skills and perhaps unsurprisingly, it was the women, rather than the men, who expressed feelings of anxiety when hosting dinner parties. The accounts of the men indicated enjoyment and joviality rather than nervousness. The majority of research on friendships has indicated the supportive nature of friendship (Harrison 1999; Allan 1998a) but for many people to whom we spoke, dinner parties, as a formal occasion, were a time of anxiety because they were on 'show'. The women were responsible for the majority of the shopping and cooking, though they often looked for certain 'masculine' roles for their partners to do, such as serving drinks or turning the meat. Sometimes the men cleaned up after the event or watched children whilst their partners were cooking. This enactment of gendered roles when entertaining in the home was a reflection of wider gendered divisions of labour within the household, all of which were an 'unspoken agreement'. Though middle class heterosexual relationships are characterised by a more equal division of household work than in working class households (Bourdieu 1984), these gendered inequalities were often the source of tension between partners. Bethany told us that her partner, Simon, usually '*doesn't quite appreciate what's going on behind the scenes to make it that perfect...*', for instance, Simon '*probably won't know what we're having to eat when he sits down at the table*'. These tensions around the gendered roles were sometimes intersected by class when couples were from different class backgrounds. Like Sylvia, Simon drew a connection between his past experiences of food as a child and his distaste as an adult for '*food as an art form*', criticising the time and emotional energy that his partner spent reading cookbooks and watching tv cookery programmes on tv. According to Bethany, Simon cannot help her when she hosts because he does not have 'taste':

...he'll say 'what are we doing?' If I say make the coffee he won't be able to do the cafetiere, he wouldn't know how many scoops of coffee to put in or anything

like that. Er and I'll have to say 'we're using those cups and those plates', 'no those are the dirty ones, get the best stuff out!' (Bethany)

Unlike Sylvia, however, Simon was able to avoid strong feelings of anxiety or failure. Whereas Simon's responsibility to his family was the 'breadwinner', Silvia, as a wife and mother, was responsible for ensuring her family's respectability and overseeing the 'project' of her children's development, which were intimately connected with cultural capital. In short, formal entertaining in the home sustained the practices of distinction and re-affirmed class identity. Moreover, if entertaining was done skilfully, couples were able to maintain their inclusion within their middle class circle of social networks.

Entertaining and Social Capital

Resources available to different age groups influenced the forms that friendship took and the activities friends did together (Allan 1998b). In order to analyse the complexities of friendship, it is necessary to explore the 'elements that *surround* friendships' (Adams and Allan 1998: 4); the contexts in which friendships occur. Overall, formal entertaining in the home did not constitute a major part of how friendship was done for the women over 60 that we interviewed, but for the younger couples, hosting and attending dinner parties were a central way of seeing friends and ensuring their position within a social network.

As most of the over 60s were retired, meeting friends was not limited to Saturday evenings but tended to involve informal gatherings in the morning or afternoon. For some older women formal entertaining was too expensive. Renee noted that, '*on pensions, you've to be careful, I mean when I was working and I just chucked things in [the basket], you know, the*

easiest way. But I don't anymore, I think about the cost of it'. As Pahl and Pevalin (2005) suggest, for older people friendships with members of kin are now much more important than non-kin relations in contemporary society. The retired women did not use dinner parties to broaden their social networks or to display taste through their foodways. As a younger woman Renee often *'would do my part'* as a member of a professional women's organisation and cater for many people. Now retired with grown up children, Renee expressed feelings that she was no longer obliged to put herself through this 'ordeal' of cooking for large groups of people. Many retired women were on a lower income than that on which they had previously been and some had moved to smaller houses and did not own cars. As Hunt (1991) demonstrated, successful home entertaining relied in part on the layout of and décor in family homes. The younger people to whom we spoke were able to host dinner parties because they had access to cars, had large and spacious indoor areas, including a dining room with a large table, a separate kitchen (in which plates, extra food and drinks were stored out of view) and another room in which to have appetisers. Some were also able to eat outside in the garden during the summer months. The centrality of the home also prevented one young woman, Rosa, from hosting dinner parties. Rosa counted herself out of hosting dinner parties for friends because of the state of repair of her house: *'I'd like to have people round more often. I just feel like my home is unpresentable at the moment'*.

Hosting and attending dinner parties were a central way that couples ensured their position within a social network, especially those aged under 60 to whom we talked. For instance, Vicky's account suggests that she associates the number of dinner parties she has hosted with her level of popularity. In response to a question on how often she entertains, Vicky replied:

[laughs] ... Oh God, that's embarrassing! Because we just don't have people round much at all, this year, we're in July, end of July erm, we've probably had three of four dinner parties. [...] And going out to other people's houses... maybe a little bit more. Five, six. Not as much as you might think. (Vicky)

Maintaining friendships and social networks whilst balancing the demands of paid work and family responsibilities was difficult. In addition to shopping and cooking for the evening, the women were also responsible for carrying out the 'love labour' of friendship (Lynch 1989), and ensuring the family's position within social networks by doing the majority of the emotional work of sustaining the friendship, for instance, keeping on track with regularly keeping in touch with friends by organising events. Despite the time and energy involved, many expressed feelings that they ought to organise dinner parties more often. For instance, Bethany considered that like New Year's resolutions, entertaining was very difficult to sustain alongside family and paid work commitments: *'we'll have somebody you know every month, and it'll happen for the first two months'* before these plans are interrupted. Because of the importance of reciprocity involved in invitations, the more dinner parties that couples organised, the more events they were invited back to. As Karen tells us, *'I would like it to be once a month that we entertain, because that means we get invited back'*.

A high quality meal was considered a gift to friends; dinner parties provided an opportunity to creatively encapsulate the requirements of guests into the menu, demonstrating both skill and care were demonstrated when hosts catered for the guests' special diets. Hosts were rewarded when guests appreciated the effort involved in organising an event. Karen – who has celiac disease – appreciates when friends *'go trawling the internet for recipes and are really, you know, really good about it'*, although she notes that since she has been diagnosed

with celiac disease *'our invitations to places have reduced'*, especially considering her partner has a food allergy. Whereas food was central to maintaining friendships, making a mistake by serving the wrong kind of food to guests with special diets (i.e. vegetarian diet or guests with allergies) could work to reduce friendship networks. Karen recounts her feelings relating to an experience of an occasion when she was invited to friend's house but could not eat any of the food provided: *"oh I haven't got any of them in". And you think well I'm supposedly your friend [...] if they've invited you around, and don't provide, I think that's rude, very rude. Anyway. So they cease to be friends then.'*

Conclusion

In an era where it is largely claimed that the time spent on cooking is decreasing, the evidence presented in this paper indicates that cooking remains a central part of how friendship is done for the middle aged, middle class people to whom we talked, though perhaps not so important for older and younger people. Although we have no data on the friendship or cooking practices of working class families, previous research indicates that working class people are less likely than middle class groups to share leisure activities with friends or to entertain friends in the home (Allan 1998a).

Hosting and attending dinner parties are an exchange of cultural capital and admittance to a select social circle. Taste – which was influenced by individuals' class backgrounds and present situations – was used to draw distinction. These events can be regarded as instances of class boundary making, for they both implicitly and explicitly work to exclude people with fewer social and cultural resources. Dinner parties, like friendship itself, were about status display and identity affirmation as well as being about the generation of social capital (Li et

al. 2003). Friendship was maintained and strengthened through displays of cultural capital, maintaining 'social distance', drawing distinctions and maintaining networks with the 'right' kinds of couples. Being on the social scene – of which the dinner party 'circuit' was central – involved being privy to information, making contacts, maintaining (and strengthening) resources. We have indicated that the social location of the people we talked to influenced how they socialise, their food consumption patterns and lifestyle choices. A class analysis contextualises friendship practices, offering an understanding of how food and friendship, and how social and cultural capitals, are intimately connected. Despite Giddens' suggestion that friendship goes beyond the traditional ties between people related to the material conditions of economic or social life (Giddens 1992), we have indicated that friendship is highly influenced by class. As we have argued, the activities and norms shared by friends were related to cultural, social and economic conditions.

Moreover, it is possible to see how the friendships enacted at dinner parties make available greater cultural resources, for example, in the form of information and advice about high-performing schools in the local area, in the way that was demonstrated by Ball (2003) and Devine (2004). Given that researchers exploring intergenerational class privilege (Devine 2004; Ball 2003; Power et al. 2003) have found that a key mechanism of perpetuating advantage is by utilising networks of social capital in everyday exchanges with weak and strong ties, it is reasonable to assume that if friendship networks acted as an information exchange, those with few social resources are indirectly excluded. The affects of these practices on class relations generally and specifically on working class people remain pertinent issues to discuss in future research in relation to home entertaining and food consumption within middle class homes.

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Notes

¹ For instance, novels, sit-coms and plays.

² Middle-class as defined by the Registrar General's Classification based on occupation.

³ Tesco is the largest UK retailer and has been criticised in the UK by some (those Tesco books), particularly for providing the only food choice for people in some areas.

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