Sosiaalilääketieteellinen Aikakauslehti 1986:23:85–92

Opening the 'black box': food, eating and household relationships

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The social organization of domestic interiors remain largely unexamined. This paper proposes that the "household" needs to be the focus of analytic attention for those intersted in home-based food behaviour. It begins to do so by looking at the food related division of labour and food distribution between adult household members in respect of gender. It concludes by considering the case for treating household not marriage, or family, as the unit of analysis.

Kotipiirin sosiaalista organisaatiota on tutkittu toistaiseksi hyvin vähän, sitä voidaan pitää tutkimuksen 'mustana laatikkona'. Tutkittaessa ruokakäyttäytymistä kodeissa, "kotitalous" tulee ottaa analyyttisen tarkastelun kohteeksi. Artikkelissa tarkastellaan ensin ruokaan liittyvää työnjakoa, sitä kuka kotitaloudessa vastaa ruoan hankkimisesta ja valmistamisesta aterioiksi. Seuraavaksi pohdintaan kotitalouden jäsenten, erityisesti miesten ja naisten välisiä eroja ruoka-aineiden käytössä. Lopuksi esitetään, että kotitalouden valitseminen – perheen tai avioparin sijasta – sosiologisen ruokatutkimuksen analyysiyksiköksi laajentaa tutkimuksen näkökulmaa.

Kirjoitus julkaistaan poikkeuksellisesti englanniksi.

"The kitchen is the great laboratory of the household"

Mrs. Beeton's Cookery Book 1899

"People can be said to belong to a household "if they eat together and share a common housekeeping, (i.e.) the food is prepared by the same person or persons and purchased from a common fund."

(Harris 1983)

Interest in social aspects of human nutrition has perhaps never been greater than now. This paper offers a contribution by bringing a sociological analysis of the household to the focus of attention. Household interiors, sociologically speaking, remain largely unexamined until very recently. By way of introducing the topic of concern here and seeking to indicate the unexamined 'space' it occupies, the paper starts with the consideration of an example each of three types of data.

The first of these is the familiar type generated by food consumption surveys. Table 1 is a typical example of the sort designed to answer questions about what people eat.

In the second (table 2) a similar question is being answered about families on very low levels of state provided income. This set of data is like the first, except that household arrengements and along with them conventions of mealtimes and culturally prescribed methods of preparation are assumed.

Table 1. Average food consumption per person per week, UK, 1981.

Item		Quantity/ounces (except where stated otherwise)	Item		Quantity/ounces (except where stated otherwise)
bread:	white	22	dairy:	cheese	4
	brown/wholemeal, etc.	9		milk, cream	5 (pints)
flour		6		butter	4
				margarine	4
cakes,	biscuits, cereals	19		fats, oils, lards	3
		57		eggs	4 (eggs)
					15
sugar	and preserves	13			
tea		2	vegetables:	fresh	28
coffee		1		dried, frozen, canned	17
		3		potatoes	42
					87
meats:	poultry	7			
	beef and veal	7			
	mutton, lamb, pork	8	fruit:	fresh	20
	bacon, ham	5		canned, bottled, dried and frozen	8
	sausages	3			28
	other	8			
		38			
			other pickles, sauces, jellies		
	fish	5	spreads, salt, canned soups, ice creams		10

(data from National Food Survey Committee, 1983)

Source: Open University (1985)

Table 2. Adult meals of families on very low levels of state provided income.

Adults Meals			
Breakfast	*Lunch*	*Tea*	*Supper*
Nothing	Toast, coffee	Rice and fish	Milk. biscuits
Nothing	Fish & chips	Nothing	Nothing
Tea	Nothing	*Mother* Sandwich, *Father* Sausage egg & chips	
Drink	Soup	Drink	Drink
Nothing	Nothing	Nothing	Egg salad
Coffee	Nothing	Spaghetti	Tea
Nothing	Egg & toast	Nothing	Nothing

Source: Open University 1985.

The third, by contrast with the previous two, is the type which derives from studies of the social interior of domestic life. Selected here are excerpts which centre on meals: all are verbatim, the first records 'family table talk', the others reports by women assaulted by their husbands.

Mother Robert! Everything is ready. Come in and eat. (to Father) Go and call Robert...
Mother (a few minutes later). Robert! Come and eat now. Everything is getting cold.
Robert O.K.
Mother (filling Robert's plate). I cooked asparagus that you like and pork chops that you like. Do you want coffee or milk?
Robert Both.
Mother (to Father) Get him the milk and a glass.
Robert I can do it, I'm not helpless or paralyzed...
Mother Do you like asparagus, Robert?
Robert Yes
Mother How are the pork chops?
Robert Good.
Mother Do you want some bread?
Robert No
Mother Are you sure?
Robert I said no.
Mother Bread is good for you. You should eat more bread. Don't you want some?
Robert I said 'no!' Besides, the bread is right in front of me, if I'd wanted some, I would have taken it.

(Bossard and Boll 1966)

He dragged me out of bed. 'Get down those f...ing stairs and get me summat to eat, you f...ing whore' he says. So I went downstairs and put something on the cooker. Then he came downstairs and started on me again. He got me bent over the clothes horse so I couldn't move... And he just kept on hitting me and hitting me and I was screaming and screaming.

He had come from work and he'd been drinking. He was late and I'd started cooking his meal, but I had put it aside, you know, when he didn't come in. Then when he came in I started heating it because the meal wasn't ready. I was standing at the sink... and he just came up and gave me a punch in the stomach... It was only because his tea wasn't ready on the table.

A month ago he threw scalding water over me, leaving a scar on my right arm, all because I gave him a pie with potatoes and vegetables for his dinner instead of fresh meat.

(Ellis 1983)

Leaving aside the concerns these extracts raise for for example criminologists and family psychologists, they provide a glimpse of household relationships in which the social organization of the provision and taking food is one of the central features. But they are glimpses — the social structure of the household as such and the organization of relationships these data imply remains to be examined.

The focus here is on eating at home. The home is, after all, the site of a large part of everyday eating, the place with a characteristic socal organization within which food is eaten and prepared. The contrast is with people eating in a place other than home, where food is commercially or institutionally provided — and also in contrast with eating at home of food that is ready-prepared elsewhere. The task in the present discussion is to develop a sociological grasp of domestic food habits, behaviour and choices. In so doing, it seeks to abide by the principle that human habits and activities have to be set in the context of the social organization in which they occur and be understood in those terms. So we have to attend to the social relationships within which eating, cooking, the expression of choice are located and appreciate the social organization of these activities and relationships. So we have to look out for questions of autonomy, control, power, the exertion of sanctions in such relationships, and questions of ideology (in its minimal sense) and belief that overlay those more fundamental dimensions.

OPENING THE BLACK BOX — TOWARDS ANALYSING HOUSEHOLD RELATIONSHIPS

Although domestic labour, housework and home-based care of dependents has been the subject of more serious and systematic scrutiny over the last ten years, associated with the rise of modern feminism (e.g., Oakley 1974 a and b, Finch 1983, Malos 1980) it is still the case that what goes on in households is often assumed rather than analysed. Stratification studies for instance, assume an equivalence amongst household members in the well ingrained convention that the status of members is given by that of the (male) head of household. And studies of the family

focus on marital, parental and kinship relations in a curious vacuum, i.e., leaving household structure partially considered, even rendering household organization invisible. (It should be noted in passing that the distinction drawn here is between *family* and *household* — a point to be considered further later in the paper.) In like fashion studies of housework (and housewives) focus on women, again only partially considering the whole household and structure. When it comes to discussion of eating behaviour and food choice, household organization is either assumed — rather than inspected — or there is silence on the matter.

To overstate the case, the picture we get — harking back for a moment to the aggregate data with which this paper began — is of an itemized list of foodstuffs going in to the home, (the black box) and fed people coming out. Highlighting the point, let us assume a household consisting of a married couple and two children, aged 4 and 9. We can look at the data on average consumption, multiply that by 4 and imagine the pile of groceries which results. Now we know very well that people do not leave that pile lying on the table straight from the supermarket, that they do not pick up the meat in their hands and tear at it raw with their teeth, or chew an unwashed raw potato whenever they feel like it or happen to be hungry. These items are not only stored, they are prepared and/or cooked, i.e., they are transformed into meals according to cultural notions of appropriateness of combination of items, types of cookery and suitability of timing, proprieties of manners and conventions for sharing between household members. Food items become meals — and meals are essentially social affairs.

Two deliberately simple questions come to mind. First, who does the work involved to transform the pile of groceries into meals? Second, how does that pile of groceries — now meals, or whatever — get distributed amongst the household members?

Who does the cooking?

The answer to the question who are the cooks? leads us to a sociological truism: they primarily are women. This is the case cross culturally (Murdock and Provost 1973), it is assumed in cookbooks, magazines, advertising and household manuals (Murcott 1983a) and it is also assumed in the provision of state welfare benefits for the disabled (Finch and Groves 1983). Furthermore, women continue to bear the main responsibility for the work whether or not they are in paid employment (Pollert 1981, West 1982, Murcott 1983b, Hunt 1980). This is not, however, to say that men (and children) never cook. As Kerr and Charles (1982) report (see also Lopata 1971, Luxton 1980 and Murcott 1983c) in the words of one of the women they interviewed —

> Anything with chips he'll do... And a Sunday lunch he will do as well. If it's plain and simple he'll get on and do it. When I was working if he was on afternoon shift he always made lunch for us... But now I'm not working I don't really expect him to do that. If I'm not very well he'll always cook.

These and other studies, however, confirm that men (and, once again, children) help rather than share kitchen work. Despite claims that men participate in the tasks more than once they used, in general, cooking (and housework) remains women's prime responsibility. Exceptions are perhaps found in some communes where an explicit allegiance to a gender-based division of labour is denied (c.f. Rigby 1974). But even here there is doubt as to whether this is actually practised, or where it is, can be sustained. (Abrams and McCulloch 1976).

How then is the labour of cooking and so on organized? Who/what controls the worker/cook? Unlike many employed workers, women are reported to value the feeling of autonomy being full-time housewives confers on them (Oakley 1974 a and b). But how far is this modified by at least two factors? The first is question of responsibility for other home-based tasks. For instance, in her study of parental behaviour, Backet reports one mother who observes of her husband —

> I was just saying that when I do go out and come back, em, he's always saying how easy it is to look after the children. But this is because he just looks after them ...He's not having to wash dishes and cook and go to the village shopping, walking, not by car... (Backett 1982:174)

(and c.f. Berk and Berk 1979, Toms Olson 1979, Murcott 1983a).

The second factor relates to the urgency, regularity and timing of cooking and meal preparation. Not only are there physiological requirements that need regular satisfaction, cultural convention prescribe the type of meal appropriate for the occasion, in turn involving its own rhythm and timing requirements. Moreover, there is the conventional presumption that women cook *for* others, especially men, but also children. This may often mean that women's work of cooking is geared towards providing meals for men's (and children's) homecoming, the timing of which, in turn, is set by employment and school hours. (c.f. Newsons 1965, Murcott 1983a).

In sum, the picture to be derived, from the English language literature at least, is of women continuing to undertake the bulk of the work of cooking and meal preparation that has to be fitted in alongside other caring and housework, as well as conforming to timetables that seem to belie housewives' perceptions of autonomy in their work. But if this looks to be women's place when it comes to the work of cooking what, then, is their position when the results of their labour are shared out?

Who gets what to eat? – the household distribution of food

There is historical evidence that women have received less and/or inferior food than men, at least in certain social classes. For instance, Spring Rice (1939) reports of working class wives in urban Britain in the 1930s.

> ...the mother will be the first to go without. Her husband must be fed, as upon him depends the first of all necessities, money. The children must or will be fed, and the school will if necessary supplement.

In rural France of the nineteenth century, Delphy (1979) reports that men were regularly accorded larger amounts of the food available than were women (and than children and the infirm elderly). Furthermore, men were also regularly accorded the choicest items; if butcher's meat appeared on the table, only men ate it, and if home reared poultry was on the menu, men received the superior cuts. It is worth noting that Delphy argues that such privileging of men is rendered invisible by custom and convention, reinforced by subscription to shared precepts such as 'women eat less than men', some foods are 'bad' for women, vegetables alone do not 'hold to the body' and are thus insufficient for men.

As for the 1980s, Graham (1984) reports for working class households in Britain that

> ...family meal times can contain different diets for men and women (and ...for children)... As part of her role as the provider of food, it is the mother's responsibility to ensure that her husband and her children are well fed.

But in households where poverty is not a feature or a major problem, there is no evidence of women's access to sufficient food's being restricted comapred to men's, although data are sparse (c.f. Ellis 1983). There is the possibility that women's access to all comestibles brought into the home does, however, vary according to type. How far the following instance of alcohol extends not only beyond Luxton's example for Flin-Flon in Canada, but also to other types of item seems still to be researched —

> ...alcohol brought into the house is considered the husband's property, and women often could not drink it unless their husbands agreed. One reason for this seemed to be that alcohol, even beer, was considered a luxury item. Because the husbands earned the money, they controlled the consumption of alcohol bought with it. A man described his understanding: 'Way I see it, I earned that booze and no one but me is going to get it'. (Luxton 1980)

There is, however, evidence that the privileging of men persists in the 1980s not in terms of amount or differential access of items, but in determination of what appears on the table at mealtimes. This is very clear in a South Wales study, where, within the limits of cost and culturally prescribed conventions for proper meals, what determines the menu is not the woman's (the cook's) prefences, but the man's. (Murcott 1983a, and see also for North Stafforshire, Hunt 1980). Similarly in Yorkshire, Kerr and Charles (1982) quote from an interview with a wife who comments —

> Mine (i.e. likes and dislikes) tend to get pushed to the backround I must admit. The things that I like that nobody else likes I very rarely get. It's usually easier to cook something that I know they (i.e. her husband and children) will eat than what — well, I mean, I wouldn't go out and think 'well I'm having this and I want this'. I tend to get what the majority like which, ten out of ten, it's not my favourite.

Thus it rather looks as if women may have reduced autonomy in the expression and satisfaction of their own food choices.

Based on the admittedly scattered evidence, it would seem, in sum, that it is women who do most of the cooking, are responsible for the management of the kitchen and related food work, but not totally free from control by various agencies in the performance of this work. Further, women appear to be constrained to provide not what they, but what men choose. As I have argued elsewhere, cooking is to be understood as a service within the household, and it is the partners' understanding of the mutual obligations of the marital relationship which defines who is to be the server, and who the served. (Murcott 1983a)

'HOUSEHOLD' AND 'GENDER' RATHER THAN FAMILY/ MARRIAGE AND/OR WOMEN

It is clear that family and household do not necessarily coincide. Apart from the increase in the number of single person households (probably not unrelated to the increased proportion of the population that is elderly) in which the question of 'who does what work' and 'who gets what food' can hardly arise, one person is likely over their lifetime to live in a variety of types of household. Even in households consisting of families, there may also be unrelated co-residents such as lodgers, or 'au pairs'. Then there are what may well be a small proportions of households consisting entirely of unrelated members, such as flat-sharing by students, communes, gay households. And once having distinguished family from household, we are better placed to analyse the variations as families develop from a newly married couple alone, later together with young, and subsequently teenage children, and so on — not to mention a newly remarked phenomenon of professional couple both pursuing careers in different parts of the country who have a home each.

This underlines the fact that the household, not the family is in practical terms the organizational and economic unit of comparison. Accordingly if we are interested in food behaviour and food choice in the non-commercial, non-institution sphere, it is the household, not the family, that encompasses the setting, the type of social context in which it takes place. Once this is specified, then the partiality of studies of the so-called domestic division of labour can be highlighted — they are more often studies of the marital division of labour. Consideration of household rather than family or marriage allows for the study, called for a number of years ago now by Bott (1957), of changes over the life-cycles in the marital division of labour. Very recently this has been examined empirically by Pahl (1984) who shows that a greater inequity in the division of labour between man and woman coincides with the presence of rather young children. But he too refers to a domestic division of labour to describe the division between marital partners, and leaves quite out of account any part played in the accomplishment of household work by children, let alone others. Indeed, only occasionally is children's contribution to domestic work reported. (but c.f. Lopata 1970, Yeandle 1984). We can assume, then, that the presence of children both creates more work, as well as more mouths to be fed, and is a potential source of more hands to share the work. For the industrialized household this familiar point needs to be examined and analysed, not just assumed.

Once the analysis of the interior of domestic relationships is under way, then the proposal that gender rather than women's position be studied needs consideration. While the literature reviewed here tends to focus on women, (work that developed as a means of redressing a balance whereby women's lives have been little studied) and partly as a result of being able to treat the domestic sphere as a legitimate topic for sociological enquiry (c.f. Oakley 1974a) to

consider women, their work responsibilities and viewpoint alone is but half the equation. What is also needed is consideration of men's part in the household and how they view their own place in it, their view of women's place in it and their account of the interior of home-based life and activities. Elsewhere I have concluded (Murcott 1982, 1983a) that the peculiarly British meal, a 'cooked dinner', symbolises men and women's mutual marital obligations and also each one's relationship to their household. But I did so based on data derived from women's accounts alone. It yet remains to corroborate them with the men's. It should be noted that although gender has been highlighted at this point, age is another dimension that is potentially just significant.

In conclusion, what then, does taking household as a central focus permit analytically? First, it allows the separation of relationships based on gender (and age), marriage (and parenthood) as well as friendship as organizing social principles when it comes among other things to food behaviour and food choice to which appeal is variously made in different households. Thus it becomes possible to study those variations systematically. Thereby a basis is also provided for the comparison of food and eating in a domestic setting with commercial, institutional and welfare settings. More to the point, in contrast to those other settings in which food is provided, we can begin to identify sociological ways (as opposed to and in addition to the psychological) of approaching the provision of food and the expression of choice in which the emotional, the affective predominates — a state of affairs aptly captured in an English saying that 'the way to a man's heart is through his stomach'. Taking the household as the unit of analysis allows us to see past such expression, see it as an ideological overlay to questions of power, authority, control, responsibility and decision-making in both the food related division of labour and food related distribution.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This and the preceding paper are based on lectures given by invitation at the *Conference on factors influencing food choice and food behaviour at* Espoo in March 1985.

I am grateful to the organizers of that meeting for the opportunity to present some of my work. I should also like to thank Phil Strong for his comments as well as the secretarial staff of the sociology department in Cardiff, especially Irene Williams, for their help.

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