Article

Journal of Consumer Culture
2015, Vol. 15(1) 48–65

DOI: 10.1177/1469540513493202
joc.sagepub.com

Creativity and cooking: Motherhood, agency and social change in everyday life

Maryann McCabe
University of Rochester, USA

Timothy de Waal Malefyt
Fordham University, USA

Abstract
Creativity in the kitchen is a normal part of everyday life in US homes. This article explores improvisation by mothers in home cooking as exemplary of the creative process. Western analyses of creativity have typically examined innovation after-the-fact, and showed how something innovative constitutes something novel that is discontinuous with the past. This is reading creativity "backward" in terms of outcomes. We provide a "forward" reading of creativity that examines the conditions and constraints which give rise to improvisation. This offers insight into cooking as a form of personal and social creativity that is grounded in the familiar, and infused with cultural values of self-expression and pleasing the family. This article thus discusses how improvisation is shaped by individual agency and social structure. Creative behavior is limited yet inspired by the material, social and symbolic constraints of the context in which it occurs, including in this case the broader context of the politics of food. Our forward reading of creative cooking practices indicates how cultural production leads to social change through the mediation of agency and structure.

Keywords
creativity, cooking, personal agency, constraints, social change

Introduction

Home cooking is alive and well in the United States. This statement challenges the alternative that home cooking is on the wane and moribund, a claim reinforced in

Corresponding author:
Timothy de Waal Malefyt, Fordham University, 113 West 60th Street, New York, NY 10023, USA.
Email: tmalefyt@fordham.edu

media and scholarly work. Well-known food critic Michael Pollan decries "the decline and fall of everyday home cooking" due to the rising number of women working outside the home, the proliferation of fast food restaurants, and increased prepared and packaged food sold in supermarkets from the industrial agricultural world (Pollan, 2009: 28). Some critics argue that changes in the meal supply chain result in deskilling or loss of cooking skills among home cooks (Caraher et al., 1999; Ritzer, 2004), while others suggest the family dinner has all but disappeared, loosening family bonds and moral order in "the anomie of the post industrialized society" (Fernandez-Armesto, 2001: 23). Home cooking also appears in retreat through the cultural lens of celebrity chefs, gourmet food, and television cooking shows as entertainment (Ashley et al., 2004). From our anthropological perspective, however, based on ethnographic research among middle-class mothers, home cooking, although different from the past, is alive and well, and essentially a creative act that identifies a key dimension of motherhood.

This article explores home cooking practices as a form of personal and social creativity. Recent work in anthropology has unpacked the concept of creativity (Hallam and Ingold, 2007; Lavie et al., 1993; Liep, 2001). Our focus on creativity emanates from concern with personal agency and social structure, and the theoretical pursuit of explaining social change. Several ideas enhance our understanding of social life through the mediation of agency and structure: the idea of hegemony from the Italian Marxist Gramsci and the notion of *habitus* from the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (Ashley et al., 2004). We consider creativity another concept that bridges personal agency and social structure because creative behavior is constrained individually and yet enabled by its social and historical context.

Brian Moeran (2006, 2011) elucidates how structural processes constrain and enable creativity. We expand this perspective by including agency as a cultural force that limits creativity yet makes it possible. In the West, creativity has been defined by the Romantic notions of uniqueness and individuality (Wilf, 2010), suggesting that creativity springs from a bountiful source of agency residing within the individual. In other words, the boundaries of improvisation are shaped by agency as well as structure. From this view, social change involves creative behavior. We examine cultural forms and social relations of creativity that arise in home cooking to show how creativity influences social change.

Our use of the term creativity follows the insightful distinction made by Ingold and Hallam (2007) of reading creativity "backwards" or "forwards." They write, "To read creativity as innovation is, if you will, to read it backwards, in terms of its results, instead of forwards, in terms of the movements that gave rise to them" (2007: 2–3). Reading creativity backward evokes the association of creativity with novelty and genius as if anything creative were singular and unrepeatable with its source in the individual. Here, we take a forward reading of home cooking as an act of improvisation to expand an understanding of creative processes in everyday life and broaden the concept of creativity as a cultural category and an aspect of motherhood.

What is creativity?

Creativity in art, literature and science has been discussed as a process that begins with restructuring something common or familiar, such as an existing artistic medium, and ends with a whole new structure without precedent (Hausman, 1979; Hospers, 1985; May, 1975). In breaking from its past, creativity is said to be discontinuous with other existing forms, and is described as an emergent form that appears with a whole new identity and coherence all its own (Hallam and Ingold, 2007; Hausman, 1979). These descriptions of the creative process, however, focus on successful *end results*, the product of reading creativity "backward," recasting the effort that went into bringing something into fruition as a narrative. Such reflections say little about the improvisational, indeterminate or "forward" processes and conditions that bring creative works into being in the first place. We describe the creative act in cooking as an improvisational act that is motivated and challenged by constraints and by associations with other people that guide and shape the individual process. We hold creativity as relational and a key aspect of defining motherhood.

A backward reading makes home cooking for mothers sound dull and repetitive. It reflects the sense of just putting another meal on the table, a meal not totally different from preceding meals. Because novelty and personal agency appear lacking in this backwards reading, home cooking seems humdrum. A backward reading discounts cooking practices and a mother's work as deskilled. Reading creativity backwards is symptomatic of modernity because it celebrates the freedom of the human imagination (Liep, 2001) and characterizes invention in terms of products and outcomes. Reading creativity backward also situates knowledge and experience within a narrative. By narrative we imply that cooking experiences structure thoughts, feelings, actions and consequences into a frame by which women interpret the present (Bruner, 1986: 142). Narratives construct a guide for "living through" and "thinking back" to make sense of what people do, as well as "wishing forward" to establish goals and models for future experience (Turner, 1982: 18). Yet, when mothers employ narratives to describe how they cook, they often look "backwards" and gloss over improvisational adjustments they make along the way, such as adding spices or modifying cooking sequences. This is why ethnographic attention to practices, or "doing" ethnography (Sunderland and Denny, 2007), is critical to revealing creative processes. Thus, instead of asking mothers to recall what and how they cooked for their family, ethnography that *re-creates the experience* can reveal improvisational creativity that is novel, unfamiliar and unanticipated. Indeed, a "forward" read of creativity, which we show here, reveals that unpredictability and indeterminacy are important dimensions to mastering cooking improvisation.

Reading creativity forward focuses on movements, conditions around cooking, people involved, and ever-increasing constraints of time, resources, and money that shape results. A forward reading of home cooking illuminates creative aspects of everyday life that are important to mothers and show that cooking manifests itself

as an emergent orientation to adjustments in daily living, personal self-expression, and recreation of the family. Women who cook for their families actively display creativity when they demonstrate an ability to transform material, social and temporal constraints presented daily in their task of cooking the family meal. No mother starts out with a blank slate, without prior knowledge of family, spouse or children's preferences and dislikes, without some knowledge of available resources on hand (meats, spices, vegetables), cooking utensils available in the kitchen, and so forth. While a mother might receive a request from her family to ''make something interesting tonight for dinner,'' she knows that foods are part of a greater repertoire of knowledge and skills she has about preferences, taste profiles, combinations of foods, and so forth. Thus, creativity in the kitchen does not occur in a vacuum by a lone cook, but rather taps into a larger network of people and established conventions. These conventions (Bugge, 2006) on what makes a good meal, eating utensils, table manners, dinner time, and so forth, are part of the larger criteria of creativity that help mothers regularly assemble a meal, even as they improvise along the way (Moeran, 2006: 89; cf. Becker, 1982).

Creative cooking, then, is explored here as a dynamic within the framework of cooking conventions (time frame, budgets, family wishes and preferences) but also involving individual agency to build on or reinvent existing materials. Everyday cooking operates within and against a given set of materials, aesthetic choices and existing experiences of knowledge that form a framework from which cooks make creative decisions. Conventions (Becker, 1982) such as cooking mediums, available food and utensil resources, economic budgets, and so forth, provide the experiential framework, social network and knowledge base from which creative ideas arise. Thus, we discuss creativity, not in terms of necessary criteria (Hausman, 1979), but rather by inverting this question and exploring the conditions and constraints that give rise to improvisation. Brian Moeran writes that any discussion of creativity begins by looking first at the actual constraints that surround the creative act (2011: 18). We ask how do certain types of conditions and constraints aid in cultural production (Bourdieu, 1993), especially in how they shape creative cooking practices?

Similarly, we consider the emotional constraints on personal agency in cooking practices. Agency is not infinite or unfettered, but references the ''socioculturally mediated capacity to act'' (Ahern, 2001: 112). Boredom with an existing repertoire and desire to become more accomplished inspire women to try something different in the kitchen, even as willingness to undertake a creative endeavor depends on their perceived level of cooking skill. Looking at new recipes with specific numbers of ingredients, steps and procedures, women make decisions on whether or not they will make the recipe based on their cooking ability. In this sense, agency is not boundless as in the cultural image of a ''good cook'' going into the kitchen and ''whipping up something'' out of thin air. Rather, the capacity to act is circumscribed by skill, knowledge and level of confidence. We explore this framework of cooking conventions and examine how the personal and social nature of agency enables and constrains the creativity of home cooks.

Since creativity is a cultural idea that varies in time and space, we should rightly speak in the plural of creativities (Hirsch and Macdonald, 2007). As Leach (2007) points out, we cannot objectify creativity, but only identify how it is realized in the material world at particular moments and places. We look at the conditions around which cooking is situated and gives shape to the current state of home cooking practices to understand the context in which creative cooking arises in the United States today. From this context we draw out the cultural values that drive this creative process in everyday life.

Background

Historically, ''feeding the family'' is an activity of women that both demonstrates a specific household labor and the unpaid work of caring for others (DeVault, 1991: 1; Parker, 2007). Women's activities of care go largely unrecognized (Oakley, 1974; Waring, 1988). For countless generations, the caring work at home has sustained family life and community as it has also constrained and oppressed women, suppressing other capacities and desires (DeVault, 1991: 2). In western industrial countries, recent attention is centered on women's work of care, as middle-class women assume more public activities typically reserved for men. Increased activity of women in labor markets has brought new awareness of issues, as many women attempt to combine their labor with household responsibilities. Workplace changes, such as working from home, commuting rotations, corporate drop-off and daycare facilities, have facilitated women's labor efforts, and allowed women to achieve more success in the public world. But women still shoulder the brunt of household work at home, such as cleaning, family care and cooking. As assumed cultural ''care givers'' women must deal with the realities of the ''double day'' (Glazer, 1980) or ''second shift'' (Hochschild, 1989); their work is never done. Nevertheless, we situate our current research on middle-class women within this issue of work/home dualities to explore the resourceful ways that mothers mitigate restrictions of time limits, budgets and care for others, while being creative with cooking in what they produce – food that nourishes and pleases others. In this, they identify themselves as cooks in how they manage time, energy, and receive recognition and reward for their efforts. This creative process, we claim, indexes a key aspect of motherhood.

Methodology

As anthropologists we have conducted numerous market research projects on food and cooking over the years. For this essay we highlight one qualitative research project conducted for a food corporation because it was specifically oriented to creativity in cooking.

Our ethnographic fieldwork involved interviewing women who were mothers of children living at home and who regularly carried out home cooking

responsibilities. We interviewed 48 middle-class women who ranged in ages and cooking abilities from their early 20s to their mid 60s. Some mothers were quite experienced and familiar with preparing meals. Others were new and inexperienced. Interviews were conducted in the US cities of Milwaukee, WI; Raleigh, NC; Minneapolis, MN; and Denver, CO as markets selected by the food corporation for representing significant sales volumes of their products. The corporation wanted to investigate consumers familiar with their brand. After the project terminated, the corporation released the data to the authors.

Two anthropologists (the authors) visited the homes of families in each market, spoke with informants about food choices, watched them select and combine cooking ingredients, read from recipe books or from online cooking sites, and prepare a meal for the family. Each interview lasted three hours and consisted of discussions on cooking habits, preferences, brand perceptions and so forth. In addition, in-home observations included a tour of the kitchen to examine pantries, cabinets, food storage areas, and the refrigerator and freezer. We viewed the brand and food products in the context of household use (Coupland, 2005). Oftentimes, consumers may not recall or simply forget the range of products and brands they possess. A thorough look inside kitchen pantries and refrigerators brought to mind available products and stimulated further creative considerations of meal ideas and favorite recipes. Prior to interviews, we asked informants to keep an in-depth journal of their daily thoughts and feelings around meal planning over the course of a week. Informants were also asked to create a visual collage of their favorite meals and depict why this was important to them. We asked them to select pictures from magazines, online, or newspapers to represent how they felt about making a meal. The research methodology included a brief shopping excursion to understand how respondents navigated the real world context of consumable goods. These combined methodological approaches helped develop a fuller picture about the way US women thought about meal preparation and constructed meals on a daily basis for their families.

Both anthropologists followed a loosely structured discussion guide, which let the interviews evolve (Thompson and Haytko, 1997). More important in the participant observation process was to listen and observe for moments of opportunity in the conversation. As women discussed their daily routine of cooking, we listened for descriptions of boredom, frustration, excitement, anticipation, and so forth. These emotional cues signaled to the interviewer how to follow the questions, and when to probe further or when to move on to another topic.

After interviewing women in the living room or around the kitchen table, we set off for the kitchen to observe them prepare a meal. The kitchen was another valuable context in which to observe the unspoken actions of meal preparation. Mothers comfortable with cooking moved with ease in finding the right spices in the cabinet, adjusting cooking temperatures on the stovetop, using oils, sauces and so forth to prepare the meal. Mothers familiar with cooking also rarely looked at recipes directly or used measuring cups, but instead would use familiarity and their own judgment as a guide. Creativity was evident in the embodied practices of these

women, particularly how the commingling of food and ingredients with experience of cooking was simply natural to their "body hexis" (Bourdieu, 1977: 87).

Dinner rituals orienting everyday life

In most middle-class households the question of what the household will do for dinner, in part, orients the day. It typically marks the time when household members reconvene after spending the day at work, school or day care. Magia, a 39 year-old former teacher who lives with her husband and three children, aged three, nine and 11 years old, says that she ponders over supper during her morning shower. When she cooks, approximately four times a week, she considers what her family might like, what ingredients she has on hand, and whether or not she needs to shop. Conversations with family members often center on meal preferences. Thus, dinner provides a framework for living in terms of how the cook will carry out dinner preparations during the day and how the family will gather for commensality at the end of the day. This allows everyone in the family to participate and imagine the return home, the meal and the interaction that will take place. Through imagining the supper event, family members construct the other with thoughts, emotions and images of each other in the same way that Miller (1998) describes food shopping. Like shopping, cooking is more than routine provisioning. It is a ritual that constitutes and affirms social relationships.

How creativity arises from indeterminacy

The daily dinner ritual is a meaningful focal point of the day for the family and a creative moment for the cook. Recent anthropological work considers ritual not only a specialized occasion set apart from ordinary life but a meaningful or poetic aspect of all experience (Sutton, 2001). In other words, creativity occurs in liminal space (Turner, 1967) and in everyday life (Pope, 2005; Rosaldo et al., 1993). Home cooked meals are creative even if the cook attempts to follow a recipe exactly, because the circumstances surrounding any repeated activity alter the process and outcome. People recognize indeterminacy in creativity when they say things like *"this is better than last time,"* or *"this is the best you've ever made it."* In other words, improvisation belongs to time, not history, because consciousness may be guided by the past but not determined by it (Ingold and Hallam, 2007).

Indeterminacy also arises from mothers electing to cook a dish they have never served. This occurs in response to clamor from family members for something different or from the cook's own desire to prepare something new. Here, we see the cultural role of boredom as an emotion (Sunderland and Denny, 2007) in relation to food and family meals. Since the US family palette becomes bored with repetition, boredom is an impetus for creativity that is framed in terms of the senses, especially taste. When trying out new recipes, mothers typically change the recipe to suit the tastes of family members. Magia says she tweaks every recipe based on what she knows each member of the family enjoys. For example, she

recently bought pork tenderloin for the first time, went online to find a recipe, and made substitutions for ingredients her family does not like. Substituting cinnamon for cumin met with success. The modified recipe is now a family favorite. Of course, improvising may not meet with success because family members may not enjoy the dish, but this is judging the result and taking a backward look at creativity. Our point is that a mother's knowledge of family taste preferences inspires as well as frames the way she incorporates new recipes into her repertoire. If recipes are cultural prescriptions for cooking (Brownlie et al., 2005), then tweaking a new recipe reflects how creativity is enabled and constrained.

Anthropologists point out that creativity thrives on indeterminacy. The open spaces and indeterminacies in social life lead people to reach for meaning and therefore to construct themselves and their society (Bruner, 1993: 332). Responding to the unexpected promotes the human capacity for improvisation, and improvisation can be celebrated as a cultural value of creativity (Rosaldo, 1993: 256). This aspect of creativity is akin to the *habitus* as a system of dispositions that allow strategy and improvisation (Bourdieu, 1977). Moeran writes:

> *Habitus* was designed to account for the obvious creativity and inventiveness shown by individual actors in their everyday lives, while at the same time recognizing that their behaviour was to some degree regulated and orchestrated by the social environment in which they had been brought up and were living (2005: 152).

Social practices and things are not created *ex nihilo*. As Rosaldo and his colleagues point out, ''Invention takes place within a field of culturally available possibilities, rather than being without precedent'' (1993: 5). Home cooking practices show how the field is not completely open-ended. The creativity of the home cooked dinner is shaped by what the cook knows or imagines will please her family. The meal is not completely novel or original because it accommodates her perceptions and experiences of family tastes. Thus, creativity addresses the relation between agency and structure because preparing something new for dinner is motivated by boredom, a wish for change and willingness to expand the limits of one's cooking abilities. Yet, it is also bounded by family preferences and the cook's desire to prepare food the family will enjoy.

Cooking as self-expression

Home cooks are craft consumers who engage in creative acts of self-expression (Campbell, 2005). According to Campbell, the growth of craft consumption in contemporary western societies goes hand-in-hand with commodification. He writes that craft consumption is ''an oasis of personal self-expression and authenticity in what is an ever-widening 'desert' of commodification and marketization'' (2005: 37). He attributes the rise in craft consumption to deprofessionalization of the middle class, a current trend that does to the middle class what industrialization did to the working class, i.e. divert creative human energies from the workplace to

leisure time activities. Home cooking exemplifies the creativity of craft consumption because the cook engages in designing and making as well as consuming a meal. Of course, the design of family meals today occurs within the broader context of a globalized industrial food system and the counter-trend of using fresh local food to create dishes that are more healthy, attractive and colorful.

The cook combines ingredients as she sees fit to produce a meal that will satisfy the taste preferences of family members. This creative process of selecting and putting together items leads to a subjectivity that includes a confident, skilled, caring and nurturing person who cooks for the family. A home cooked meal encompasses creativity and personal accomplishment and thus represents a differentiated sense of self (Moisio et al., 2004). Creativity takes the cultural form of the cook's identity and pride. Mothers may try a food then modify it slightly to become something new and different. Adapting recipes within a familiar framework is both grounds for creative expression and a mark of personal identification and pride. If foods are "too far out," such as cooking something exotic, there is not only fear of rejection from her family, but also a cook is less likely to receive recognition for her efforts. The tension between difference and familiarity is evident for the cook to receive recognition for cooking a meal, since change creates value (Appadurai, 1986). Still, familiarity with a food or recipe is the base from which a new and different meal is made. Creativity in daily cooking is most evident, then, not in wild new dishes or experiments, but rather in small changes of appearance and new names that signal difference from a familiar base. Improvisation occurs here as a product of relations and interactions in a field of strategic possibilities (Bourdieu, 1993: 34). As Bourdieu explains the dynamics of fields, active changes within a system, such as substituting or modifying ingredients, are defined in relation to other positions within a system. From any movement of or among these positions relative to the whole, their value is determined (1993: 30). The implication is that slight variations on a single meal idea are powerful grounds for newness, difference and creativity. Slight variations allow the cook to put herself into the recipe and make it hers. She then gets recognition for it: "I did this." Creative cooking practices celebrate motherhood by delivering internal rewards in terms of personal satisfaction and self-esteem.

Cooking creatively is a transitional space that prepares for motherhood. The tension between boredom and inspiration changes across the life cycle of women who cook for their family. Early adult years of learning to cook are marked by trial and error in acquiring cooking skills and discovering what ingredients and flavors go well together. At this learning stage, a sense of adventure and fear of failure run high while boredom remains low. Then, during the years of raising children, creativity plateaus as mothers master dishes and develop a repertoire in response to family tastes. Boredom sets in, which women describe as "being in a rut." They repeat recipes the family likes and do not stray far from family tastes when trying something new. Cooking at this point in life is oriented to others and the satisfaction of preparing what they enjoy. Empty nesters typically revert to being more adventurous in the kitchen. Lynn, a 50-year-old working woman who raised two

children and has been an empty nester for three years, feels excited about cooking for herself and her spouse. She speaks of stepping ''outside the box'' because their palettes are different from their kids. When we visited her home, Lynn made spaghetti carbonara accompanied by a fresh green salad with vegetables from their home garden, a meal she would not have served her children. For her, creativity reignites an adrenalin rush that comes from experimentation. The self-expressive aspect of creativity resumes a role of importance in cooking during these later years of life. Thus, cooking practices are differentiated across the life cycle by experience and inexperience and by the emotional states of adventure and boredom.

The relational nature of creativity

Mothers also receive inspiration and motivation from family and friends, which reveal the relational nature of creativity (Ingold and Hallam, 2007). This relational aspect of creativity is what ethnographic analysis of creative arts such as storytelling in small-scale societies has identified (McLean, 2009). Home cooking is oriented to others in many ways. Cooks have favorite pots, pans and utensils in the kitchen such as a particular frying pan or a stew pot that they love to use in cooking. Like other commodities, these pots and pans acquire a social life (Kopytoff, 1986) and contain memories of cooking successes and failures, and shared meal experiences. By using these pots and pans with their social history and meaning, food commodities are transformed into family meals or inalienable objects (Miller, 1998). Favorite pots and pans provide one example of possessions that reflect the relational nature of creativity. All the things a cook keeps in the kitchen (e.g. spices, pantry staples and dry goods) are deemed necessary elements for combining into something suited to family tastes. Kitchen possessions show the rootedness of the cook in the home as a producer of meals for the household. They also indicate how creativity or change develops out of the structure or organization (possessions) of the kitchen. Creativity flows from an organized, structured context that has social roots.

Feeling inspired to cook also orients a world of social relationships in ways that mothers express care and concern for the self and others. Creative inspiration comes from emotional thoughts of others, and is not simply indifferent. Food itself may be objectified, but cooking and preparing a meal is a personal and social transformation of that food into something meant to please or excite others. Meal preparation involves the creative act of constructing social relations, personal ties, and shared emotional space with others. Food preparation is essential to how we imagine and construct relations with others (Miller, 1998). As with devotional love in overcoming the drudgery of everyday provisional shopping, what Miller writes could also be said about cooking, that the act is:

> . . .dominated by your imagination of others, of what they desire of you and their response to you; it is about relationships to those who require something of you. Often these are relationships of devotion, mainly routine devotion, that may be deep or may

> be superficial, and are mainly taken for granted, except where the choice becomes a sign that you have shown some care (1998: 3–4).

There is also an embodied sensibility to cooking (Sutton, 2001) that reflects the relational nature of creativity. The sensuous experience of cooking involves the cook and other household members. Through seeing, smelling, tasting, stirring and mixing ingredients, a cook produces a meal and enjoys the sensuality of cooking. At the same time, the family gains sensuous pleasure from the smell of food wafting through the home. People are first drawn to food though their senses. The embodied dimension of sensory experience extends into the cognitive dimension of thinking, planning and feeling inspired about foods and meal preparation. Mothers in our study reported taking cooking books or magazines with them to the market to shop, or reading magazines in the library or during free time at home. As one mother said, ''I want to taste and smell the food right off the page.'' One mother brought a magazine with her to her son's soccer practice to read while waiting. Other mothers used magazines to kick back and read slowly, describing the activity as ''my therapy.'' Magazines created a palpable space and time for recipes that was distinct from online experiences, where they could relax and contemplate recipes in magazines. This shows that for meal ideas, the internet was used more as means to an end, not an end in itself. The internet was a fast tool to help them search out meal ideas quickly, but was not creatively employed for contemplating or imagining family togetherness at mealtime. Magazines were the preferred choice to imagine family meals together.

Common to both online and print experiences, women were drawn to highly visual pictures that influence their decisions for meals. The more vivid the images were, the more women imagined a meal possibility. In particular, pictures that showed people eating together in the ''real world,'' such as family or friends gathered around a table, appealed to women as more real and became more meaningful than just pictures of food alone. Making meals ''real,'' as we recommended to the food company, means bringing food into an everyday busy framework that orients a sense of time pressures, familiar tastes, visual appeal and happy family gatherings.

Cooking and recreating the family

Cooking engenders sharing, a fundamental form of consumer behavior distinct from commodity exchange and gift giving (Belk, 2010). Sharing a home cooked meal reproduces the family and can dissolve interpersonal boundaries within the family otherwise established through materialism and possession of objects of material culture (e.g. my computer, your clothes). This occurs with cooking because the meals produced incorporate the taste preferences of everyone in the household. As a result, meals reflect family identity. The family dinner is a metonym of the family itself through which people recognize themselves as families (Ashley et al., 2004). Cooking transforms nature and links us to others in a nexus of family relations.

When a family has supper together, the food acts as a boundary marker encoding a message about the identity of the family and their taste preferences (Douglas, 1975). The message which separates "our family" from other families is enacted daily. It creates a sense of belonging among members of the household. The cooks in our ethnographic studies always emphasized the importance of commensality, of coming together as a family, sitting at the table, talking and sharing stories about their everyday lives. Although family dinner discourse may vary by social class (Southerton, 2001), the discourse and shared stories renew family bonds.

The generative nature of creativity

Cooking is a form of cultural production and embodied practice that reproduces the family as a dynamic unit. Over time individuals develop and grow as human beings. Their taste preferences also change during this maturation process. As a result, the family dinner is a performance that tracks and confirms family identity. The creativity of cooking is generative in how it defines and redefines the bounded entity called family; however, it is constituted through a changing repertoire of meals. Recalling dishes formerly enjoyed but no longer part of the repertoire, such as homemade chicken nuggets, speaks mnemonically to the enduring family group. Family meals over time narrate a history of family identity. Indeed, family identity through food is ardent enough to be passed on generationally through handwritten recipes of, for example, mother's spaghetti sauce, that upon first sight are able to immediately evoke tears of remembrances, as we have observed.

The creativity of cooking is also generative in terms of providing a focus for family memory practices and formation of prospective memories (Sutton, 2001). The taste of specific foods and meals become an embodied experience for future remembrance. We tend to think of holiday meals in this regard (Wallendorf and Arnould, 1991), but everyday dishes also generate memories for the future. For example, a set of grandparents in our ethnographic studies were excited about preparing lunch for their young grandchildren that included a can of plain tomato soup to which they added elbow macaroni because that is how their son, the father of their grandchildren, liked to eat it when he was a child. Thus, cooking has power to create memories of family and values it represents through a shifting sensorium (tasting, smelling, hearing, seeing food to be consumed). Memories reflect the sharing, caring and nurturing of social bonds in the home.

Another relational aspect of generativity in cooking is the trust that family members have in mothers to improvise and produce meals they will enjoy. The importance of trust arises from the indeterminacy of cooking as described above. Moeran (2011) argues that trust is a deciding factor in the creativity of cultural production because of uncertainty surrounding the final result. Even if a particular meal does not please the taste buds of everyone, there is a shared feeling of assurance that mothers will take their reactions into consideration for future meals. In fact, such reactions do become part of a mother's store of knowledge about family preferences that she uses in planning and preparing subsequent dinner foods.

Creativity in this relational sense reflects values embedded in creative cooking practices; namely, recreating the family with meals that satisfy the senses of everyone.

Creativity and the politics of food

Decisions about what to cook for dinner occur within a politics of food that has sparked recent scholarly interest in food (Coleman, 2011; Counihan and Van Esterik, 2008; Press and Arnould, 2011). The politics of food affect cooking creativity in key ways. Women today want to cook meals that are "more healthy" for their families, where healthier is defined in contradistinction to industrial agriculture, poor nutrition and rising rates of obesity (Ritzer, 2004; Schlosser, 2002). Awareness of the importance of incorporating more fresh vegetables and fruits, especially locally grown ones, has infused cooking practices. For example, a young couple in our study cooked a meal of grilled pork, grilled yellow and green squash, and fresh red raspberries and strawberries. They described the food on their plates as healthy, colorful and inviting to eat. In other families, a mother made a green salad to accompany ordered-in pizza, while another cooked a pasta dish with fresh vegetables to accompany an entrée bought at a supermarket. Yet this attention to adding more fresh produce in meals takes place within the limits of family preferences. Creative use of fresh food to make meals healthier is constrained by what the family will eat and also by other factors such as time and budgets. Some people can afford to express their food values by purchasing local, organic and fair trade fruits and vegetables, while others find these foods too expensive, and instead opt for frozen vegetables.

Home cooks are comfortable combining fresh, prepared and packaged foods in meal preparations. Since World War II, when the food industry developed technologies for preserving food, consumers have become accustomed to using frozen, canned, instant and dehydrated foods (Shapiro, 2004). Due to their ease of use, low cost and place within family repertoires of favorites, they are staples in many homes. Anita, a 28 year-old hospital ER technician who has been married for three years, assembled a dinner for herself and her husband one evening while we conducted ethnographic research in her home. She designed a balanced meal with foods they enjoy including grilled meat, a box of instant mashed potatoes, frozen corn on the cob and a fresh salad. Although she is an accomplished cook, and prepares whole meals "from scratch" when she has time and inclination, her choices that evening reflected the relational and generative nature of creativity. She prepared foods that would please herself and her spouse, yet allowed them time together. The creative act involved designing the meal, combining specific ingredients in response to household tastes, and sharing the meal as a way to renew social bonds. Incorporating packaged food into meals redefines cooking "from scratch" and can invoke the deskilling argument (Short, 2006). As Short argues, the deskilling argument only recognizes "proper cooking," that is, from scratch with all fresh and raw foods, an argument which privileges "proper cooking" as nostalgia and a

badge of honor (2006: 103). Yet, women who re-define cooking "from scratch" by incorporating packaged food into meals do not nullify the symbolic meanings attached to homemade (Moisio et al., 2004). Rather, creative agency is spurred by women's desire to cook meals her family will enjoy and foster commensality.

Creativity expresses an ideological dimension because cooking practices are embedded in the politics of food and reflect changing cultural values of everyday life. Through everyday creativity in the kitchen, women express values in relation to food, family and industrial agriculture. Most mothers choose to cook fewer than seven nights a week to accommodate busy lifestyles based on values such as self-fulfillment, engagement with the world and retaining youthfulness. While mothers support the involvement of family members in activities outside the home, they are also keenly aware of accentuating time together. One mother, for instance, makes a point of teaching her 10 and 12 year-old children how to cook at home instead of buying the packaged foods they desire in the supermarket. We watched another mother teach her eight and 10 year-old sons how to bread and sauté chicken nuggets. Working side-by-side in the kitchen, the woman passed along creative cooking skills and values to the next generation. These practices show that the concept of creativity is political and contested (Woronov, 2008). The meanings that middle-class mothers ascribe to creative cooking differ from those provided by industrial agriculture solutions in deciding what to prepare for dinner.

Conclusion

Anthropologists employed in advertising and marketing research, as we have been, can augment the generalized views of consumers that corporations typically hold (Malefyt and Morais, 2012). This benefits corporations since many base their advertising, marketing plans and new product developments on particular views of consumers. One such view we challenged is that home cooking is moribund and mothers are no longer inspired by meal preparation. Because anthropologists explore more holistic perspectives of consumers' lives, we see other social and material connections beyond consumers' relationship with a given brand or product in question. This holistic outlook leads to insights that expand the use and scope of the brand. In our case, we explored the social and emotional world of women who cook, beyond just making meals, and saw how women's interconnections with aspects of their "creative selves" and family lives actively enhanced relations with others, and contributed to feelings of motherhood.

Creative cooking practices elevate and celebrate motherhood. Our ethnographic picture leads us to conclude that cooking has risen in the hierarchies of practices (Warde, 2005). Rather than regarding family meal preparation as a mundane chore or an "issue" for mothers balancing work with family life (DeVault, 1991), we claim cooking delivers internal and external rewards. Pleasing her family with healthy and good tasting meals grants mothers a deep sense of satisfaction and self-esteem. At the same time, creative cooking practices build social and cultural capital. Family members give praise and recognition for meals they delight in.

By providing food and time for enjoying each other, mothers re-create the family in the present, validate its identity over time, and mnemonically direct its future. Cooking and motherhood are generative of myriad social relations that help sustain the family.

From our research we surmise that creativity in cooking does not occur "out there" in a vacuum. It occurs in daily life shaped by the constraints of time, money, ingredients, family preferences, and by imagining a meal made from familiar flavors and ingredients that surround everyday life. Meal ideas for mothers in particular are gleaned from the immediate world of lived experiences, as creativity is grounded in personal relations, familiarity with ingredients, and in what is known, both from the aspect of other people as sources, and from foods and flavor profiles that are familiar.

Creativity of cooking in everyday life highlights a perspective on transformation that adds to theoretical understanding of social change. Theories of domination, such as Gramsci's concept of hegemony (Gramsci, 2010), Foucault's notion of knowledge as power (Foucault, 1980) and Marx's notion of capital and owning the means of production (Marx, 1992), have emphasized structure and power, where change is imposed from dominant structures "above." From this viewpoint, agency lies in the hands of the powerful elite. In theories of resistance, on the other hand, agency comes from the hands of revolutionaries "below" who attempt to refashion consciousness and protest institutions, policies and persons in power.

We argue that forms of power do not inform the best way to understand home cooking practices, even though mothers resist industrial agriculture, as the growing popularity of farmers markets and home gardens in this country attests. Cooking practices show, instead, that "home cooks" are more than resistant. They are actively creative in producing something new that is grounded in the familiar, as they are responsive to a network of social relations. By looking at the constraints of creative cooking practices, we see how agency and structure are mutually implicated in bringing about change (McCabe and Fabri, 2012). Agency is influenced by a culturally constructed sense of boredom, by the trust that a family places in their mother, and by her perceived level of cooking ability. At the same time, meals are structured according to constraints of family taste preferences as well as time, budgets and resources in the home, and the politicized appropriateness of certain foods, such as local, organic or something else. Improvisation in cooking thus mediates both agency and structure, and constitutes a normalized practice of everyday life.

Creativity involves change and the reverse holds true, that change involves creativity. In the case of home cooking practices, women value the small and subtle improvisational changes they make as natural to self-expression, pleasing the family with sensory experiences, and recreating the bonds of family life through motherhood. Women also embrace change as they creatively adapt cooking practices to changing conditions throughout stages of life and motherhood. Creativity is thus a vital yet often unrecognized dimension of motherhood that seeks to be acknowledged in this and further studies.

Funding

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

References

Ahearn LM (2001) Language and Agency. *Annual Review of Anthropology* 30: 109–137.
Appadurai A (ed.) (1986) *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Ashley B, Hollows J, Jones S, et al. (2004) *Food and Cultural Studies*. London: Routledge.
Becker HS (1982) *Art Worlds*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
Belk R (2010) Sharing. *Journal of Consumer Research* 36(5): 715–734.
Bourdieu P (1977) *Outline of a Theory of Practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Bourdieu P (1993) *The Field of Cultural Production*. Cambridge: Polity.
Brownlie D, Hewer P and Horne S (2005) Culinary tourism: An exploratory reading of contemporary representations of cooking. *Consumption, Markets and Culture* 8(1): 7–26.
Bruner EM (1986) Ethnography as narrative. In: Bruner E and Turner V (eds) *The Anthropology of Experience*. Champaign: University of Illinois Press, pp. 139–155.
Bruner EM (1993) Epilogue: Creative persona and the problem of authenticity. In: Lavie S, Narayan K and Rosaldo R (eds) *Creativity/Anthropology*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, pp. 321–334.
Bugge AB (2006) Domestic dinner: Representations and practices of a proper meal among young suburban mothers. *Journal of Consumer Culture* 6(2): 203–238.
Campbell C (ed.) (2005) The craft consumer: Culture, craft and consumption in postmodern society. The craft consumer: Culture, craft and consumption in postmodern society. *Journal of Consumer Culture* 5(1): 23–42.
Caraher M, Dixon P, Lang T, et al. (1999) The state of cooking in England: The relationship of cooking skills to food choice. *British Food Journal* 101(8): 590–609.
Coleman L (2011) *Food: Ethnographic Encounters*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
Counihan C and Van Esterik P (eds) (2008) *Food and Culture: A Reader*. London: Taylor and Francis.
Coupland JC (2005) Invisible brands: An ethnography of households and the brands in their kitchen pantries. *Journal of Consumer Research* 32(1): 106–118.
DeVault M (1991) *Feeding the Family: The Social Organization of Caring as Gendered Work*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
Douglas M (1975) *Implicit Meanings: Essays in Anthropology*. London: Routledge.
Fernandez-Armesto F (2001) *Food: A History*. London: Macmillan.
Foucault M (1980) *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972–1977*. Gordon C (ed) New York: Pantheon Books.
Glazer NY (1980) Overworking the working woman: The double day in a mass magazine. *Women's Studies International Quarterly* (3): 79–83.
Gramsci A (2010) *Prison Notebooks*. Buttigieg JA (Trans). New York: Columbia University Press.
Hallam E and Ingold T (eds) (2007) *Creativity and Cultural Improvisation*. Oxford: Berg.
Hausman CR (1979) Criteria of creativity. *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 40(2): 237–249.

Hirsch E and Macdonald S (2007) Introduction, creativity and the passage of time: History, tradition and the life-course. In: Hallam E and Ingold T (eds) *Creativity and Cultural Improvisation*. Oxford: Berg, pp. 185–192.

Hochschild A (1989) *The Second Shift*. New York: Viking.

Hospers J (1985) Artistic creativity. *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 43(3): 243–255.

Ingold T and Hallam E (2007) Creativity and cultural improvisation: An introduction. In: Hallam E and Ingold T (eds) *Creativity and Cultural Improvisation*. Oxford: Berg, pp. 1–24.

Kopytoff I (1986) The cultural biography of things: Commoditization as process. In: Appadurai A (ed.) *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 64–91.

Lavie S, Narayan K and Rosaldo R (1993) *Creativity/Anthropology*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

Leach J (2007) Creativity, subjectivity and the dynamic of possessive individualism. In: Hallam E and Ingold T (eds) *Creativity and Cultural Improvisation*. Oxford: Berg, pp. 99–116.

Liep J (2001) Introduction. In: Liep J (ed) *Locating Cultural Creativity*. London: Pluto, pp. 1–13.

McCabe M and Fabri A (2012) Vitamin practices and ideologies of health and the body. *International Journal of Business Anthropology* 3(1): 39–61.

McLean S (2009) Stories and cosmogonies: Imagining creativity beyond 'nature' and 'culture'. *Cultural Anthropology* 24(2): 213–245.

de Waal Malefyt T and Morais RJ (2012) *Advertising and Anthropology: Ethnographic Practice and Cultural Perspectives*. Oxford: Berg.

Marx K (1992) *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, Vol. 1*. Fowkes B (trans) New York: Penguin Classics.

May R (1975) *The Courage to Create*. New York: Norton.

Miller D (1998) *A Theory of Shopping*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

Moeran B (2005) *The Business of Ethnography: Strategic Exchanges, People and Organization*. Oxford: Berg.

Moeran B (2006) *Ethnography at Work*. Oxford: Berg.

Moeran B (2011) Perspectives in business anthropology: Cultural production, creativity and constraints. *International Journal of Business Anthropology* 2(1): 16–30.

Moisio R, Arnould EJ and Price LL (2004) Between mothers and markets: Constructing family identity through homemade food. *Journal of Consumer Culture* 4(3): 361–384.

Oakley A (1974) *The Sociology of Housework*. New York: Pantheon Books.

Parker KJ (2007) *Food Is Love: Advertising and Gender Roles in Modern America*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Pollan M (2009) Out of the kitchen, onto the couch: How American cooking became a spectator sport, and what we lost along the way. *The New York Times Magazine*, 2 August, 26–47.

Pope R (2005) *Creativity: Theory, History, Practice*. London: Routledge.

Press M and Arnould EJ (2011) Legitimating community supported agriculture through American pastoralist ideology. *Journal of Consumer Culture* 11(2): 168–194.

Ritzer G (2004) *The McDonaldization of Society*, 4th edition. Thousand Oaks, CA: Pine Forge Press.

Rosaldo R (1993) Ilongot visiting: Social grace and the rhythms of everyday life. In: Lavie S, Narayan K and Rosaldo R (eds) *Creativity/Anthropology*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, pp. 253–269.

Rosaldo R, Lavie S and Narayan K (1993) Introduction: Creativity in anthropology. In: Lavie S, Narayan K and Rosaldo R (eds) *Creativity/Anthropology*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, pp. 1–8.

Schlosser E (2002) *Fast Food Nation: The Dark Side of the All-American Meal*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers.
Shapiro L (2004) *Something from the Oven: Reinventing Dinner in 1950s America*. New York: Viking.
Short F (2006) *Kitchen Secrets: The Meaning of Cooking in Everyday Life*. Oxford: Berg.
Southerton D (2001) Ordinary and distinctive consumption; or a kitchen is a kitchen is a kitchen. In: Gronow J and Warde A (eds) *Ordinary Consumption*. London: Routledge, pp. 159–178.
Sunderland PL and Denny RM (2007) *Doing Anthropology in Consumer Research*. Walnut Creek, CA: West Coast Press.
Sutton DE (2001) *Remembrance of Repasts: An Anthropology of Food and Memory*. Oxford: Berg.
Thompson CJ and Haytko DL (1997) Speaking of fashion: Consumers' uses of fashion discourses and the appropriation of countervailing cultural meanings. *Journal of Consumer Research* 24(1): 15–42.
Turner V (1967) *The Forest of Symbols*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
Turner V (1982) *From Ritual to Theatre: The Human Seriousness of Play*. New York: PAJ.
Wallendorf M and Arnould EJ (1991) We gather together: Consumption rituals of Thanksgiving Day. *Journal of Consumer Research* 18(1): 13–31.
Warde A (2005) Consumption and theories of practice. *Journal of Consumer Culture* 5(2): 131–153.
Warning M (1988) *If Women Counted: A New Feminist Economics*. New York: Harper and Row.
Wilf E (2010) Swinging within the iron cage: Modernity, creativity, and embodied practice in American postsecondary jazz education. *American Ethnologist* 37(3): 563–582.
Woronov TE (2008) Raising quality, fostering creativity: Ideologies and practices of education reform in Beijing. *Anthropology & Education Quarterly* 39(4): 401–420.

Author Biographies

Maryann McCabe is senior lecturer at the University of Rochester. She is founder and principal of Cultural Connections LLC, a marketing research consultancy in Rochester, NY. Her ethnographic research involves US cultural practices, relations between producers and consumers, and social change. At the University of Rochester, she works with students who do an entrepreneurial study year.

Timothy de Waal Malefyt is visiting associate professor at Fordham University Business School in NYC. Previously, he worked in advertising for over 15 years as Director of Cultural Discoveries for BBDO Worldwide advertising in NYC, and at D'Arcy, Masius, Benton & Bowles in Detroit. He holds a Ph.D. in anthropology from Brown University, is co-editor of ***Advertising Cultures*** (2003), co-author of ***Advertising and Anthropology*** (2012), and co-chair of EPIC conference for 2013. He is frequently cited in Business Week, New York Times, USA TODAY, among other media.