

# Is there a culinary skills transition? Data and debate from the UK about changes in cooking culture

Tim Lang and Martin Caraher

## Introduction

This article presents findings from British and European research, and debate on contemporary cooking skills. It posits a general theory – the Cooking Skills Transition thesis – and provides supplementary arguments. The central case is that, much as there is a nutrition transition in which whole cultures experience fundamental shifts in their diets, for example in the ‘westernisation’ of developing countries’ diets (Popkin, 1994; Drewnowski & Popkin, 1997), there is what we call a ‘culinary transition’. By culinary transition, we refer to the process in which whole cultures experience fundamental shifts in the pattern and kind of skills required to get food onto tables and down throats. This article presents data from the United Kingdom to illuminate this argument in order to contribute to the debate about whether similar processes are underway in Australia and other developed and developing countries. Australia has a vibrant debate about its culinary traditions and the role of its cuisines, but this debate has tended to focus on the ‘public’ face of consumption (Symons, 1982; Symons, 1993). At least one Australian book has expressed a trenchant position that cooking is in decline (Ripe, 1993). Our argument is that cooking skills are being re-structured and fragmenting with different lifestyles. We have argued elsewhere that the issue might be one of confidence to use basic cooking skills rather than necessarily a decline in skills. It is important to acknowledge too, that there might never have been a golden age of cooking skills. Cooking skills are adapted to external variables such as location, income, food availability and, above all, gender roles.

A particular interest is the role of the State. This article suggests that cooking is often a sensitive matter for the State because it symbolises motherhood and the stereotypical female nurturing role. This is, of course, based in the reality of child-rearing. It is decidedly not an epiphenomenon. The social role of cooking is ‘plastic’ in that cooking can be

both oppressive and liberating, conducted by males or females, consumed as pleasure or pain. What matters is whether cooking and its skills are locked into one pattern of social meaning rather than another.

A key feature of the debate about culinary skills – or certainly for the British State which funded a cooking campaign in the early 1990s on this basis (National Food Alliance, 1993) – is the impact of diet on health. In cultures without access to restaurants or factory food (that is, where others cook and there is a highly developed cook/consumer division of labour), domestic cooking is the sole source of processing. In that respect, cooking skills are important for health and well-being. But in a food system that offers the affluent opportunities to be fed by others, what are the implications for health? If there is a decline in home cooking, does it matter? It is perfectly reasonable to argue that cooking is no longer necessary in a hi-tech world, in which case, there is little general cultural role for home economics. In England and Wales, cooking was, in fact, quietly dropped from the formal curriculum, when a French-style National Curriculum for schools was introduced (Leith, 1997a). Scotland and Northern Ireland, however, retain an element of practical cooking within home economics although this is not mandatory for all pupils. A food element was in the Curriculum, but it was theoretical rather than practical, and industry-oriented rather than domestic.

This article explores these issues and concludes that in a time of considerable cultural change, there are grounds for supporting the cultural role of ensuring widespread basic cooking proficiency. There are three broad reasons for professional and State support. Cooking skills are:

- necessary for the understanding of what constitutes a healthy diet;
- an important part of an empowerment process for individuals who wish to exercise control over their diet and food intake, whether by cooking and

preparing their own food or by knowing/understanding the processes that go into ready prepared foods; and

- a vehicle by which citizens can engage with the social norms of a society in which food is central both for existence and identity.

"Absence of cooking skills must be a barrier to achieving a healthy life."

### A brief history of State thinking and action on cooking in the United Kingdom

By the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century, squalor and disease induced by half a century of rapid industrialisation in the United Kingdom were so rife that they threatened the affluent. The great era of public health intervention began with the 1848 Public Health Act. This heralded decades of cumulative legislation on water, food, housing and sanitation. Within this intervention was woven a debate about cooking and domestic roles. Lack of cooking skills was seen as one reason why the poor did not eat a healthy diet. A scheme for local authorities to raise a rate (tax) to fund the provision of school meals, for instance, was legislated by the Liberal government in 1906 with the newly emergent Labour Party arguing their worth on social justice grounds, while Conservatives argued that a state scheme would undermine mothers' responsibility to feed their children. The latter views were again rehearsed when the Thatcher government repealed school nutrition standards in 1980. And by the late 1990s, the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food set up a research program based on the premise that low income families can benefit from acquiring cooking skills. Such a premise makes three assumptions. Firstly it assumes a lack of skills when the available evidence does not support this (Caraher et al., 1999; Dowler, 1995). Secondly it assumes poor management skills, when again, available evidence shows that the poor are good domestic managers. Thirdly, it targets the poor and women in the name of 'Family Policy' as a means to control the reproduction of labour.

A debate about the role of cooking is, in short, nothing new. In the 1780s *The Times* of London was calling for the poor to be educated in the basics of cooking. In the 1840s, the great English public health reformer, Chadwick, was making similar pleas: *'Ignorance of domestic economy leads to ill health by the purchase of unsuitable and at the same time expensive food.* From the State's perspective at the time, cooking skills were an aspiration that ought to be induced in the labouring classes. Absence of cooking skills

must be a barrier to achieving a healthy life. Skills were essential to maintain domestic service; if servants lacked cooking skills, how could they be good servants? This urgency evaporated with the reduction of servant classes after the World War 1. What was previously a task for servants became a matter for all women. Cooking skills became an urgent need for middle class women to use directly, rather than to apply to their domestic labour force (Hardyment, 1995). Figure 1 shows the front of a book aligned to the introduction of town gas and designed to appeal to the new emerging middle classes. It also illustrates the influence of new technologies on cooking and domestic skills.

Figure 1. Front cover of a book from the turn of the century (first edition, 1907; current illustration from the 11<sup>th</sup> edition, 1930)



Some of the first 'modern' thinking about the social implications of cooking follows the pattern of debate about industrialisation with its concomitant moral panics about women working, the deserving and undeserving poor, manners and the possible demise of the Victorian household. Concern split on predictable lines with conservatives worrying about the loosening of the social order. These considerations have their offspring today with worries about so-called 'latch key kids' (children at home unsupervised because mothers are

working) and the perennial perception that the family is under threat. Food and family meals add fuel to the fire of such debates.

These late 19<sup>th</sup> century concerns contributed to the creation of the new female professions of health visiting and domestic economy (latterly science). The former role was to visit the homes of the poor and to instruct them in the art of home and child management, while the latter profession emerged to teach domestic skills to young girls in the classroom, after originating in household management for the middle classes. As ever in Britain, social class infused the creation of both roles. Middle class women leapt at employment opportunities created primarily (but not solely) to target the working classes.

But the attempt to foster cooking was not wholly an act of social control. Cooking can be either enslavement or freedom. Among emancipatory thinkers, a definite strand throughout the developed world aspired to liberate women from domestic chores such as cooking, arguing that the State sought to bind women to the kitchen and domestic chores (Attar, 1990). Perhaps the most remarkable statement of this early position was made by the US feminist Charlotte Perkins Gilman, who argued that utopia would be where homes had no kitchens but shared collective restaurants (Lane, 1981). A century on, the issue now is on whose terms the new pattern of cooking and eating has been introduced, with radicals arguing that the explosion of cooking in the factory disenfranchises and ties the consumer. There are also those who argue against attempts to bridge the gender divide and claim that the increasing 'feminisation' of society is detrimental to men and families (Moir & Moir, 1999).

The issue with cooking and culture is not whether someone cooks but where and why; not whether one can eat without knowing how to cook (after all, one gender has long made a virtue of this!) but what health and cultural impact this has; not whether skills can or should be imparted, but who does this, in what context and why.

### **The changing social face of cooking**

This deep analysis of the social significance of a mundane issue such as cooking skills may seem unimportant. In a society where a phone call or an e-mail can secure your evening meal or your total groceries for the week, why should we be worried about any

possible decline in cooking skills? A cartoon exists which depicts a man (? husband) returning home from work and asking a woman (? his wife): 'what are you making for dinner tonight?' The answer, short and precise, is 'a telephone call'. This illustrates the freedom of modern technologies and how food roles may be restructured through them.

In the United Kingdom, organizations such as the National Food Alliance and many food writers (encouraged by the influential Guild of Food Writers) have made the loss of cooking skills education a rallying call. They have been accused of mythologising a halcyon era of cooking (usually the post World War Two era in which women were reluctantly 'encouraged' back into domestic life after a decade of active service both in the war and on the so-called domestic front (Minns, 1980). Other critics have cautioned on the lack of evidence to back any such assumptions (Murcott, 1997; Hardyment, 1995) and others have pointed to the enslaving process that domestic cookery imposed and continues to impose on women's lives (Attar, 1990).

What is the evidence that can illuminate this diversity of views? The Henley Centre, a contemporary social research body in the United Kingdom, estimates that over thirty-six per cent of British adults now cook at least once a week for pleasure (Henley Centre, 1994), implying that most cooking is still perceived as a duty. A survey in 1997 (National Opinion Polls, 1997) showed that the British public spent less time in the kitchen than their European neighbours. This same research showed that forty-two per cent viewed cooking as an enjoyable occupation, fourteen per cent saw it as a creative activity and eleven per cent used it as a 'de-stressing activity'. This epitomises the move of cooking from a valued occupation or chore (Oakley, 1974/1990; Fort, 1997) to a section of the leisure industry, a move from cooking as production skill to a consumer and leisure focus. While this approach to cooking may characterise affluent social groups, most people do not cook from basics everyday. A survey for McDougalls Foods (1999), the main suppliers of home baking ingredients in the United Kingdom, found that home-baking from scratch – 'scratch bakers' – was a thing of the past. Yet the association with home baking was one of nostalgia and of childhood memories. The survey suggested that a lack of up-to-date models for home-baking means that such associations are likely to recede into the past and not be a part of the stock



memories of the current generation. Yet in the promotion and marketing of ready-prepared or pre-cooked foods, such associations are likely to be used with advertising appeals that a factory food 'tastes just like mother's cookies'.

A key feature of the cooking skills debate is time. Overall, surprisingly, data suggest the United Kingdom is a leisure-poor society rather than a leisure society. Family life at home has certainly altered. Since 1961 people spend an extra two hours and twenty-six minutes outside the home eating out and going out. As Gershuny and Fisher (2000) have pointed out, pre-prepared meals and better cleaning products mean the average person spends two hours and forty-one minutes less time doing domestic chores per week. This is, however, balanced by an increase in the time spent shopping and on associated travelling to food suppliers. This has risen by two hours and forty-eight minutes per week, largely because of the growth of out-of-town supermarkets (Caraher et al., 1998; Robinson, Lang & Caraher, 2000; Reisig & Hobbiss, 2000). Such data tend to be collected by industry-funded researchers, so too little emerges into academic discourse. What exists, however, suggests that, to paraphrase ad-speak, contemporary foraging/gathering skills remain an issue although their nature has altered. The so-called liberation from the kitchen and cooking has been replaced by a different responsibility for women of gathering and assembling food. Henley Centre data suggest that males – particularly older / retired men – play a much more equal part in food shopping. British market research figures also suggest a small rise in the number of men preparing meals and cooking in the kitchen. This colonisation of the kitchen by men seems to parallel a rise in speciality cooking and cooking for special occasions. There is no evidence, however, that cooking by men is a regular event in family life or that they take responsibility for teaching children cooking skills. Numerous sources suggest that women still assume the main responsibility for cooking in the home. So when health promotion people or marketers talk about families, they really mean women.

With the changes in eating habits over the last twenty years, it can be argued that traditional cooking skills – that is, taking raw ingredients and turning them into complete culturally appropriate dishes – may be becoming redundant (Mintz, 1996). The United Kingdom, like many developed countries, has

experienced a rapid growth in eating outside the home and more ready-to-eat meals in the home (Office for National Statistics, 1997 a and b; Caraher, Lang, Dixon & Carr-Hill, 1999). Food manufacturers and retailers have been quick to exploit and respond to social change (Stitt et al., 1997). In particular, the rise in women in the waged labour force has created markets for convenience foods. Social trends suggest a move from cooking in the home from basic ingredients to a post-modern or consumer society that relies on the labour of others with ready-prepared foods (Lupton, 1996; Ritzer, 1993 & 2000; Beck, 1992; Beck, Giddens & Lash, 1994). Fieldhouse (1995) has argued

*if prepared food is so easily accessible, why bother to learn to cook? If you haven't acquired cooking skills, then fast foods are the most efficient answer.*

Ritzer (2000) has argued that efficiency is relative and depends on the accounting method used. It may be that to drive to the local McDonalds and pick up a family meal to 'eat out' may not be that efficient if we allow for the contribution of the travel to food miles and the damage to the environment.

A recent pan-European study found that the time needed for food preparation was identified by the young and those with higher levels of education as a barrier to healthy eating (Institute of European Food Studies, 1996). A recent Henley Centre forecast predicted that by 2020 '*kitchens in the home may become a thing of the past, or worse, people will simply not know how to cook*' (Novartis, 2000). The trend is towards lone dining even when people don't live alone and fast food habits. Britons have the 'fastest' food habits in Europe and eating 'on the hoof' is a growing feature, with entire new industries servicing the trend such as sandwich shops and coffee bars. The diversification of food provision by 'pubs' – previously drinking bars – is a return to an older tradition of inns. What is different today, however, is the scale and extent of the trends. Seventeen per cent of Britons eat in a fast food outlet weekly and thirty-three per cent of women express the belief that cooking and preparing food is too time consuming (Novartis, 2000).

From this perspective, it follows that the take-away and eating-out market will continue to develop, not just for technological reasons, but as a response to social pressure to deliver food for new domestic circumstances. The Home Meal Replacement (HMR) market will

**“When health promotion people or marketers talk about families, they really mean women.”**

continue to grow and is already being subject to trial by many of the large supermarkets who offer full take-away meals. The consumer regards this form of convenience food as more acceptable than food from a take-away, possibly because it still requires some input from the consumer in re-heating and re-plateing. In the United States of America, food market expenditure is rapidly approaching an even split between food 'prepared' at home and that eaten out or consumed as 'take out' food. Existing technological developments have already had an influence on the home, reducing the maximum cooking skills needed to those of simply re-heating and assembly. Such developments can reduce the cost differential between eating at home and eating take-away or take-out food. There is some evidence that for low income families, when hidden costs such as electricity are accounted for, the cost savings of cooking at home compared to eating ready-prepared foods are not significant (Dobson et al., 1994). The United Kingdom leads Europe in its use of convenience foods, but countries such as Germany, Spain and Italy, which up until recently have resisted this trend, are now beginning to accept convenience foods (Novartis, 2000).

### **Cooking skills and health: any relationship?**

As suggested above, arguments for the importance of cooking skills range from their relationship to healthy eating (Department of Health, 1998), through their use for those on low incomes to achieve healthy diets, to their role as an essential life-skill and source of fun in their own right. In the late 1990s, the Royal Society for the encouragement of Arts, Manufacturers and Commerce (RSA) set up a retailer-funded national cooking roadshow for schools. This has been taken to thousands of schools (RSA, 1997).

But what is the relationship of cooking to health? There is some evidence that cooking classes or training programs that are multifaceted in their approach and which operate within a health-promoting settings approach, may influence behaviour in the short term (see Bostock, 1993; Demas, 1995; Kennedy & Ling, 1997; Caraher & Lang, 1995). In addition, the concept of relative poverty leads us to hypothesise that acquisition and knowledge of food preparation skills are necessary to guard against what Crotty (1999) calls 'food insufficiency'. This may mean that a low-income family, for example, is well nourished from a nutritional perspective, but

experiences deprivation through a lack of access to 'highly valued foods'. Food insufficiency needs to be conceptualised in cultural and social terms, not just from the viewpoint of under-nutrition. Cooking skills may contribute to this sense of food insufficiency by preventing people fully participating in food culture. It should be stressed, however, that the prime determinant of food insufficiency is financial want, not the absence of skills.

The lack of empirical data hinders the development of a coherent theory. The practical use of everyday food preparation skills could play a significant role in helping improve health. The Health Education Authority (HEA) for England in *The Balance of Good Health* (Health Education Authority, 1994), commended by the Department of Health's Nutrition Task Force, promotes food such as pasta, rice, green vegetables and oily fish without adequately addressing who can cook them or whether skills and confidence are evenly distributed among the population. By assuming skills, it can add to a sense of social exclusion.

Knowledge of how to prepare and cook food generates health-relevant skills. Kemm (1991) termed this 'know how' as opposed to simply 'know what' knowledge. Far from being an out of date and irrelevant skill, an argument can be made that possession of cooking skills can be empowering in a world where the individual is faced with a bewildering array of ready-prepared foods. Cooking skills prepare people to make choices in a fast-changing food world. Without the skills, choice and control are diminished and a dependency culture emerges. As Roe et al. (1997) in their review of healthy eating interventions note, the provision of information alone does not change behaviour; interventions should be interpersonal and focus on behaviour change. The teaching of practical cooking skills can include all these elements.

### **Different traditions of studying women as targets and victims**

Since the 1970s, a strong stream of academic work in the United Kingdom has highlighted the central role of women and mothers in affecting what is purchased, cooked and consumed (Charles & Kerr, 1984; Brannen et al., 1994; Murcott, 1995; Charles, 1995). These studies have tended to underline cooking as a domestic role borne by women, having considerable ideological significance,

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particularly with regard to the family. While these studies are useful, they often use cooking as a symbol of other issues such as oppression or the decline in family values. There is little direct work on cooking skills for their own sake, which is surprising. The historian Theodor Zeldin (1995) has noted, 'there has been more progress in cooking than in sex' Cooking, he argues, has evolved, while procreation has not. Murcott's work (1982, 1986 and 1998) gives cooking *per se* most attention. For her, cooking is an issue worthy of study in its own right and her critique is located within an anthropological / sociological perspective.

Another tradition of research, rooted in earlier generations' concerns about costs and facilities (Spring Rice, 1981), has looked at the constraints on diet and domestic food culture of particular social groups such as single women and mothers (Dowler & Rushton, 1994; Kempson, 1996). This tradition of research has highlighted the complex process women perform daily of juggling cost, skills, taste and availability. Besides their immediate relevance to social policy debates about welfare and hardship, such findings connect with anthropological studies showing the symbolic significance of cooking within culture – see, for example, Douglas, 1972; Douglas & Isherwood, 1978; Mintz, 1996). They also show the danger of isolating cooking skills from the wider social and cultural agenda.

In the past, women have been targeted as the domestic source of cooking skills but this should not be the case today. As Demas (1995) and others have shown, boys can, and do, show considerable interest in cooking. Although there was some gender effect, the Department of Health funded *Get Cooking!* Project found almost as great an interest in learning to cook among males as females (MORI, 1993; National Food Alliance, 1993). However as pointed out earlier, interest does not translate into responsibility or routine action in the domestic sphere.

There is currently no literature available on the evidence for the effectiveness of cooking skills in influencing choice of healthy foods or of healthy cooking techniques. The current literature is largely conceptual and qualitative in nature. It could be argued that most studies have raised rather than resolved the meaning of cooking skills in the United Kingdom. Randomised controlled trials may not be the only or best method of answering

questions of effectiveness, but there is a need for more rigorous studies to determine the effects of cooking skills on food choice and behaviour. Particular settings such as schools are obvious choices for introducing intervention studies.

### **Issues arising**

A famous Hollywood director once said: '*when the legend becomes a fact, print the legend*' (Eyman, 2000). The same can be said of cooking, raising, as it does, many emotions, prophesies of hope and doom, together with claims to an equally romanticised and brutal past. In the following sections of this article, we explore issues arising from the culinary transition thesis. We expand on the ideas above by exploring ten issues. We do this mainly by drawing upon data from a survey carried out for the Health Education Authority in England (Lang et al., 1999), unless otherwise stated. This survey, conducted on behalf of the Health Education Authority (HEA), is a rich and detailed source of information, especially on access to food supplies, eating, cooking and shopping. It could act as an initial baseline set of British data on cooking.

Questions in the Health Education Authority (HEA) survey included which foods were consumed, how they were purchased and the circumstances of cooking. The survey consisted of 5,553 interviews with 16–74 year olds at a random sample of addresses in England, stratified by NHS region. People were interviewed in their own houses where possible, with interviews averaging an hour and a half. Despite the use of a booster sample of 16–24 year-olds to address some of the limitations, the sample is biased in several ways and it was necessary to weight these data to make the results more representative. Full details of the methodology can be found in the paper published by the HEA and in other papers reporting the findings (Lang et al., 1999; Caraher et al., 1999).

### **Issue 1:**

***There is a rise in technological skills with a corresponding decline in mundane skills such as cooking.***

As has been suggested earlier, a 'high tech' argument can be posited that cooking skills are an anachronism and relic of a past age. The findings in table 1, from a poll of 7–16 year olds for the Department of Health-funded *Get Cooking!* Project, which helped write the Health Education Authority Health & Lifestyles Survey questions, suggest a technological

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"

orientation in children's skills. The issue for public policy is not whether young people are skilled, but which skills they have and their relevance to health. The findings suggest young people's food skills rise with greater technological inputs in the preparation of food. Using the microwave scores higher than preparation of food from basics. The proportion with the skills to make a cake (54 per cent) is higher than those who can cook a potato (38 per cent). Is this because preparing a cake is simply a matter of opening a packet rather than cooking from 'scratch'?

**Table 1. Young people's skills: 'Which of these things can you do yourself?'**

Skill	Percentage with these skills
Play computer games	93
Use a music centre or CD	77
Programme a video to record something on TV	61
Heat up a pizza in a microwave	60
Make a cake	54
Cook a jacket potato in the oven	38

Source: National Food Alliance / MORI, 1993 (Question 1)

These findings have been consolidated by a subsequent survey for the Good Food Foundation (1998) which found that young people nominate the following as a cookery skill:

Making a sandwich	36%
Making toast	31%
Opening cereal boxes	20%
Cooking chips	11%
Cake mixes from a packet	9%
Cooking eggs	9%
Cooking a pizza	7%

Hands-on cooking or cooking from scratch are hardly represented in the findings. The top skills require assembly of ingredients and/or the opening of packets.

**Issue 2:**  
**Not being able to cook is cited as a barrier to choice in the diet.**

One in ten people in the Health Education Authority Health and Lifestyles Survey (HLS) cite not being able to cook as a barrier to choosing types of foods (Lang et al., 1999). This ranges from:

- nine per cent of those in lowest income group (less than £3k/year) not knowing how to cook some foods

- six per cent in the £3–7k and 8.7 per cent in the middle income group (income between £7–14k/year)
- to twelve per cent in the highest income group (>£14k).

The ability or lack of ability to cook is not just a factor among low income groups. The more affluent cook less but are able to buy their way out of any health and social implications. Lack of cooking skills may be identified as a barrier but so is the time involved in preparing and cooking the food. This has been identified across Europe among women who go out to work. Lupton (2000) found a similar trend among rural Australian women.

**Issue 3:**  
**People do have some skills necessary to put together 'meals'.**

We found that despite the growing importance of eating out, 58 per cent ate at least seven main meals at home each week (Lang et al., 1999). Of those who had eaten at home in the week prior to the survey, most (79 per cent) had no ready-prepared meals in the past week, and a similar proportion (79 per cent) had no take-away.

These results indicate that a large number of meals are still cooked or assembled in the home setting. The skills used are not available from the quantitative data. It is possible that the definition of cooking needs to be refined to include re-heating or using the microwave, and preparation may include assembly from different ready prepared goods.

**Issue 4:**  
**People are using take-aways in greater numbers.**

Although the majority of the sample were still preparing food at home, there was an indication that the take-way eating-out market is set to explode. Expressed as a proportion of main meals, approximately seven per cent were ready-made and five per cent were take-aways. It was interesting that those from a higher socio-economic group were more likely to have consumed ready-prepared meals in the week prior to the survey. In this respect, an assumption that the more affluent have more control over their diet via cooking may be misplaced. People on low incomes do eat out but the take-away is their main source. It is eating out by buying in. In general, the eating-out market is growing fast and eating out in a restaurant is becoming an accepted part of normal social life rather than an event

The definition of cooking needs to be refined to include re-heating or using the microwave. "

or indulgent occasion. Partially this has been achieved by the catering sector becoming more informal and delivering convenience food that is closer to what we eat at home. This has been matched by the home being colonised by fast food culture.

Irregular working hours and the demands of work are cited in other surveys as the reasons for the growth of the take-away and home replacement meal services. Convenience, allied to speed, become the key factors in determining what people eat. Between 1993 and 1998, United Kingdom consumption of ready-made meals doubled to reach sales of £786 million, with eighty per cent of these single portion dishes (Novartis, 2000). Lupton (2000) found that rural Australian couples were more likely to cook meals at the weekend when time was more available but were also as likely to eat out at a restaurant.

**Issue 5:**  
*The responsibilities for everyday versus 'occasion' cooking are not shared equally between men and women.*

Almost eighty per cent women cook most or every day, compared with twenty-five per cent of men. On average, women respondents cooked on 5.8 days per week, men on only 2.5 days. Other surveys have reported men cooking more but this appears to be for special occasions such as a dinner party or entertaining. The burden of day-to-day responsibility for cooking has not shifted; the gender burden still exists. Cooking for family, and particularly for children, tends to be the responsibility of women.

**Issue 6:**  
*Confidence in cooking skills is gendered and has a strong class bias.*

Ninety-four per cent of women, compared to eighty per cent of men, were either fairly or very confident about being able to cook from basic ingredients. Sixty-eight per cent of females, for instance, compared to forty per cent of men, were confident about using steaming and women were also more confident about stewing, braising and casseroles. In most cases, confidence with cooking techniques is greatest in higher social and educational groups and the trend is particularly strong for stir frying and microwaving. Deep-frying is the only technique for which the trend is reversed with more people from a lower educational background expressing confidence in using a deep fat fryer.

**Issue 7:**  
*Confidence in cooking specific foods is gender- and age-related.*

The trend of gender and class is again seen when we talk about cooking specific foods. For instance, eighty-one per cent of women are confident in cooking pasta, but only fifty-nine per cent of men. Even in cooking fresh green vegetables, there is a gender divide, with seventy-eight per cent of men confident and ninety-five per cent of females. If people cannot or do not feel confident in cooking specific foods they may not act or be able to act on healthy eating messages.

**Issue 8:**  
*The main sources of cooking knowledge and influences are mothers and school.*

While this may not be much of a surprise, the strength of the finding is significant. Might this change, with other routes for knowledge such as television or peer groups increasing in influence? Certainly in the early 1990s when the Health and Lifestyles Survey was conducted, mothers were the most frequently cited source of skills, with cookery classes at school second, and cookery books third most mentioned. There were large gender differences in this finding. In the case of men, the most striking finding is that nearly half of 16–19-year-olds mentioned cooking classes at school, compared with only 2.4 per cent of 55–74-year-olds. Learning to cook from wives and partners was the only influence that increased with age for the male respondents. Overall, men were slightly more likely to have first learned cooking from their wives or partners than from school or books.

**Issue 9:**  
*Apathy and time as identified barriers to learning more.*

A significant proportion of the population consider that they know enough about cooking already. Fifty-four per cent said they 'know enough already'; thirty per cent were not interested in cooking and thirty per cent cited a preference for ready-prepared food. The plethora of cooking programs on television – which accelerated throughout the 1990s – the popularity of cookery books and the rise of the celebrity 'TV chef' suggest that such endeavours may play a greater role in entertaining the public than in changing their eating habits (Caraher, Lang & Dixon, 2000). We have argued elsewhere that the new public 'face' of cooking in the media – an average thirty hours of food and cookery shows were

**"**More people from a lower educational background expressing confidence in using a deep fat fryer.**"**

broadcast on British media by the late 1990s – is still viewed more as entertainment than something culturally deep. It remains to be seen what lasting effect the food scandals that rocked Britain from the mid 1980s might have. Much depends on the role of food opinion-formers and on the State response to the crises in food governance. The United Kingdom, later than Australia, set up a Food Standards Agency and like Australia, is already seeing its national food governance institutions having to mesh with other countries both via the European Union (which is setting up a federal European Food Authority in 2002) and through the World Trade Organisation.

### **Issue 10:**

#### ***There is state ambivalence with respect to the policy regarding cooking skills.***

The United Kingdom State has a split position on support for cooking skills. On the one hand there is a strong case that investment in the skills base is economically necessary to maintain the vastly expanded catering sector. On the other hand, the replacement of practical cooking classes in Domestic Science by a food element in the 'Design and Technology' curriculum in England reflected the triumph of food processing industry interests (Stitt et al., 1997). Within the State apparatus, there was disquiet at this decision. When the Department for Education and Employment (DEE) withdrew cooking skills from the school curriculum in England and Wales, the Department of Health funded a national community initiative designed to promote cooking skills among young people, supported by the Ministry of Agriculture. Seen as a whole, then State support for cooking initiatives is as a worthy 'fringe' issue, lending moral but no financial or curricular support to initiatives run by Non Governmental Organisations (NGOs) such as *Get Cooking!* (1993–1996) (National Food Alliance, 1993) and *Focus on Food* (1998–present) (Royal Society for encouragement of Arts, Manufacturers and Commerce, 1997).

### **Discussion**

The future requires us to recognise the changing nature of 'cooking'. There is little point in holding onto tradition simply because it is tradition even if, as we have argued for cooking traditions, it is unclear what actually is traditional! Nevertheless, it is clear that cooking has a role in people's everyday lives, even if at remove. The Health and Lifestyles Survey data underline how the role of cooking in culture is both common and diverse. As a

long imperial power, the impact of diverse culinary tastes has had a deep impact on eating within Britain. The mass arrival of Indian sub-continent 'curry' restaurants in Britain is but the latest import to have a profound impact on cooking techniques and ingredients.

Our key concern here is the relationship of cooking culture to health. We have argued that the State cannot expect people to take control of their health if they do not know how to cook, shop, and discriminate. Cooking skills that may currently reflect and exacerbate the dietary, shopping and social exclusion divides, might be a vehicle for their restriction (Robinson et al., 2000).

Cooking, like eating, is in a process of rapid transition. New influences on cooking include globalisation, changing production and processing methods, the growth of ready processed/prepared food and the increase in take away/out meals. Some of these have not been a part of the research agenda, which has tended to focus downstream on individual and family behaviour rather than on the factors such as technology and the supply of food that determine or influence cooking behaviour. We contend from the available evidence that large food retailers are not just responding to a cultural change, but are using market levers to suit their own agendas with little thought for longer-term public health outcomes.

With more women working outside the home, the range of domestic skills and the mechanism for their transmission has started to be restructured. Murcott (1982 and 1998) noted that while men may now cook and help in various household chores more than previously, the responsibility for passing on cooking skills still belongs to the mother; the nexus is from mother to daughter. As well as the home, the school has been a key location for skills transfer. The role of school has been to expand and build on skills learned from significant female figures in the home, mothers and grandmothers (MORI, 1993). The introduction of the new English national curriculum had a clear gender dimension in that it removed cooking skills from the school mainstream (for girls), replacing it with technology and design oriented content (for both girls and boys). A more central traditional role for cooking was retained in the curriculum of Scotland and Northern Ireland. It remains to be seen what long term impact this might have. Both Scotland and Northern Ireland have even worse diet-related ill-health patterns than the more affluent English.

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Debates over the importance of cooking skills inevitably raise the argument that a return to cooking skills could be 'code' for a socially conservative argument that the rightful place for women is the kitchen. Notions of cooking and motherhood are entwined. Oakley (1974/1990) locates cooking as part of housework, the unpaid and unrecognised work of the housewife. If health educators promote a new case for cooking skills, a distinction has to be made between the skills taught and to whom they should be taught. It is important not to advocate a return to an oppressive past, where individuals (women) slaved over hot stoves preparing meals from basics. There is a need to guard against blaming women, and particularly mothers, for changes in cooking skills. Charles and Kerr (1986) commented that health promotion practice is particularly vulnerable to social conservatism in relation to family food and feeding practices.

The domestic environment has changed dramatically and the issue of cooking and changes in technology can be viewed as an extension of areas where women have exerted more control. Ready-prepared foods and advances in food technology, such as refrigerators and better ovens, have undoubtedly helped women exert greater control over their lives, but, as with washing up following the arrival of dishwashers, were gender divisions transcended or merely restructured? Despite the new technologies, men still do not share the burden of cooking and housekeeping equally (Lupton, 2000). Although women spend less time in the kitchen preparing meals, they appear to spend some of this time saved travelling to supermarkets and shopping (Caraher, Dixon, Lang & Carr-Hill, 1998). The gender gulf in time harnessed to the home is considerable. The chore of the kitchen has been replaced by the chore of shopping and driving.

Whether cooking skills have declined or never rose or have been restructured, it is clear that they have collapsed in the English and Welsh school. State action has been highly significant, but it remains to be seen whether the decision was final. With a crisis looming as second generation Asians express reluctance to follow their parents in the restaurant trade, yet with curry now the top 'national' dish of the British, will the State reintroduce cooking, if only to fuel the hospitality industry?

A century ago, the State took a clear and leading role in transmitting culinary and household skills to women. The late 20<sup>th</sup>

century curriculum implies that food skills are now to be left to marketing and advertising departments in the private sector. As we have shown, there was speedy but unsuccessful resistance to this position even from within the State itself. Yet it was the voluntary or Non-Government Organisation (NGO) sector which took, and still takes, the lead in promoting the social virtues of cooking. Health arguments, despite the National Food Alliance's *Get Cooking!* campaign successful initiation of debate about cooking skills, have remained marginal. The then Conservative government adopted a consumerist perspective, which has been maintained by the Labour government since. The need to look at the determinants of health as much as health itself remains (McKinlay, 1993).

Currently in the United Kingdom, the flag for cooking skills per se is flown by the Royal Society for encouragement of Arts, Manufacturers and Commerce's *Food in Schools* program, which is targeting teachers and encouraging them to experiment with different, more imaginative ways of teaching general food skills. The *haute cuisine*-oriented Academie Culinaire de France, together with a national newspaper, also replicated the French scheme of local chefs going to primary schools to talk about taste, with practical examples of how foods taste different. Although not actually about cooking, this demonstrated that to cook is exciting for the taste buds. The scheme now runs nation-wide in France – seen as the home of a deep food culture, but we suspect in fact that the country is experiencing the culinary skills transition as well.

All is not pessimism among supporters of the health-cooking connection. Cooking initiatives were given policy support by the State health agencies such as the Department of Health (1995) and Health Promotion Wales (Clarkson & Garnett, 1995). The Low Income Project Team (LIPT) of the Nutrition Taskforce also called for more food clubs and skills opportunities for all young people, not just females, both at school and in the community (LIPT, 1996).

We have suggested that there are important differences of interest over cooking within public policy. Firstly, there were the differences between ministries – Education and Employment versus Agriculture and Health, with the former dismissing the latter's concerns. Secondly, there are divergences in ideological position on cooking – with Non-Government Organisations such the Royal

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Society for encouragement of Arts, Manufacturers and Commerce (RSA) focusing on cooking skills as enjoyable (RSA, 1997 and 1998) while the National Food Alliance, with support from the Department of Health and Health Promotion Wales, argues that cooking skills are necessary to live a healthy life (Clarkson & Garnett, 1995; Department of Health, 1995). This latter position explains the support for cooking skills given in local initiatives by health promotion workers, particularly dietitians. More work is needed to map out the sources and nuances of these differences, but they appear to be significant and symptomatic of a skewed and fragmented approach to the area of cooking skills within public policy.

At the heart of the divergences is a real theoretical problem. Is the meaning of cooking the process or the end-product? Is cooking a matter of following the rules of assembly or the labour process itself? These are theoretical issues long debated by anthropologists (Douglas, 1972; Goody, 1982; Levi Strauss, 1992) and now becoming central for health promotion. In our view, the central issue is control. Does a modicum of cooking skills mean consumers can choose a more health-enhancing diet? Do skills give control to prepare food, whether 'healthy' or less so? It seems self-evident that without basic skills, there is little choice but to accept ready-prepared meals with all the complications of labelling information and interpretation that ensues (Lang, 1995). But what are the short and long-term actual rather than theoretical implications of this culinary skills transition? Research is required to monitor effects.

### Conclusion

This article has presented data from a British perspective although we suggest that the changes in cooking skills are not simply a British phenomenon but reflect a wider global transition that is occurring. With its high levels of food sector concentration – like Australia's – is the United Kingdom at an advanced stage of this skills transition or merely exhibiting another peculiarity of its imperial and mass industrial class history? It could also be argued that the cooking skills transition is but another illustration of the McDonaldisation of culture or a facet of Americanisation (Ritzer, 1993 and 2000). More detailed work is needed on the meaning of cooking.

In conclusion, the cooking skills transition thesis exhibits at least the following key features:

- the 'escape' of women from the kitchen;
- the restructuring of inter-generational transfer of skills;
- the narrowing gap between the price of raw and ready-prepared food (in-home and eating-out);
- an increased use of technology both to use (e.g. microwaves) and think about food (e.g. TV, the world wide web);
- the creation of consumers with a mix of dependency and levels of skill;
- the withdrawal of the State from direct cooking skills education while retaining a grip on public policy determining the area;
- a food industry with 'space' to create dependency but with concomitant contractions internally (catering versus processing; retail versus 'eating out' markets, etc);
- a fragmentation of food culture and food 'literacy';
- privatisation of learning (via media, corporate sponsorship);
- an appeal by strong cultural forces to envisage any skills transition as 'progress' (whether through benign or active involvement).

These features may themselves be historically located, and over time alter. At present, however, traditional approaches to teaching cooking skills to individuals are inadequate, misplaced and sometimes irrelevant. A challenge to health policy in particular is how to focus upstream from the individual onto the social determinants of health. Borrowing from McKinlay and Marceau's (2000) paper on smoking, we suggest that modern public health currently focuses excessively on educating those without skills rather than framing the conditions under which disenfranchisement is formed.

This policy challenge is not new. Modern complex societies lack easy levers that may deliver health gain. There is no simply identifiable 'pump handle' as when Dr John Snow could prove the impact of contaminated water on cholera rates among Londoners by removing the pump handle, so stopping a population from imbibing death. A complex issue like cooking skills offers no simple pump handle.

From the United Kingdom experience, we are suggesting that programs designed to ameliorate a deficit in cooking skills are swimming against the tide and not tackling the determinants of the problem. In effect, health educators are treating symptoms rather

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than causes of ill health. The Australian experience has much to contribute to this debate. Initiatives such as the government of Western Australia's *Kids in the Kitchen* initiative (Health Department of WA, 1998) are rich in potential for both research and culture. Our argument is that the United Kingdom experience suggests that cooking draws on a deep well of meaning with wider as well as cooking culture.

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