

Food shopping and preparation among the 30-somethings: whose job is it? (The ASH30 study)

Amelia A. Lake, Robert M. Hyland, John C. Mathers,
Andrew J. Rugg-Gunn, Charlotte E. Wood and Ashley J. Adamson
Human Nutrition Research Centre, University of Newcastle, Newcastle, UK

Abstract

Purpose – The paper aims to explore the food shopping and preparation responsibility in a sample of adults, average age 32.5 years.

Design/methodology/approach – A sample of 198 adults (81 men and 117 women) who were involved in a longitudinal dietary study self-completed a questionnaire about their food habits. Chi-squared analysis explored relationships between variables using SPSS (version 10). Open-ended responses were analysed in QSR NUD*IST using a content analysis framework.

Findings – The majority of respondents were married or co-habiting (79 per cent), 6 per cent were lone parents, 9 per cent lived alone and the remainder lived with parents and others. Significantly more women than men were responsible for food shopping and preparation (both $p < 0.001$). Within shared households food responsibility was predominately a female dominated area, with a considerably higher proportion of women responsible for food shopping and preparation compared with men. Reasons given for this included aspects of time and work as well as women being more skilled in this task.

Research limitations/implications – The study was a relatively small and homogenous sample, not necessarily representative of the wider UK population.

Practical implications – Identifies the enduring gender divide in food responsibility. Findings will be useful to health educators, policy planners and researchers.

Originality/value – In light of the recent focus on diet and health, this paper describes the reported shopping and food preparation behaviours in a sample of adults in their 30s at the beginning of a new century.

Keywords Food products, Shopping, Gender, Responsibilities

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Food purchasing and preparation is an important aspect of food behaviour. The “burgeoning of interest in diet and a growing fascination with eating” identified by Murcott (1998) has continued. Cookery programmes are a staple of TV schedules, though as Blanc (2006) observes, their appeal is often quite superficial. Cooking can be seen as a creative task, yet food purchasing and food preparation is widely perceived as a chore and a mundane necessity (Kemmer, 2000). Previous work has focused on the

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division of labour within households, but few have specifically explored involvement in food-related tasks (Harnack *et al.*, 1998).

Over the last 30 years there has been a shift in the pattern of partnership and household arrangements with an increase in the proportion of single and divorced people and a decrease in the proportion of married people (ONS, 2004). The average age at marriage has increased by 7 years since 1971 to 32 years of age for women and 35 years for men (ONS, 2004). With a decline in marriage there has been an increase in cohabitation; women are more likely to cohabit at a younger age than men (ONS, 2004).

Alongside changes in household configuration, major changes have occurred affecting both the structure and pattern of food preparation and consumption (Kemmer, 2000). Within shared households (married or cohabiting), couples explicitly or tacitly apportion responsibility for domestic chores such as food purchasing and preparation. The “life-course stage” of couples has been described as critical in the division of household tasks (Warde and Hetherington, 1994). Gender issues were explored in a US study where younger men were more likely to be involved in meal planning and preparation than older men, suggesting age-related attitudinal differences regarding involvement in household tasks (Harnack *et al.*, 1998). Historically women were often perceived as “gatekeepers” (Lewin, 1943) deciding which foods their family should eat and giving them a controlling position. These roles of “gatekeeper” and “home maker” appear to have gradually diminished with an increase in the number of women working after childbirth (Worsley, 1988) and the change in household structure. Major changes in gender roles and food have occurred, but women are still most likely to be responsible for food-related tasks (Murcott, 2000).

Earlier work described the traditional notion that, within families, it was the women’s role to prepare a “proper meal” which consisted of the customary “meat and two veg” (Murcott, 1982; Charles and Kerr, 1988). There was symbolic significance attached to the role of women in preparing this “proper meal” for her husband, the breadwinner (Murcott, 1982), in families where women were “servers” and men were “providers” (Charles and Kerr, 1988).

There are significant gender variations in approaches to cooking which are stronger than variations due to age groups, income and socio-economic group (Caraher *et al.*, 1999). In a recent UK sample, 68 per cent of women cooked every day compared with 18 per cent of men (Caraher *et al.*, 1999). Most of the sample had learned to cook from their mother (76 per cent women, 58 per cent men), while a smaller proportion of women compared with men had learnt to cook from their partner. This work highlights the significant role a mother may have in future generations’ ability to cook and their food choice.

Food purchasing, preparation and the clearing up of food are often described primarily as a female role; men may be supportive in these activities, but ultimately it is female dominated (Kerr and Charles, 1986). Husbands or male partners may have some “covert” influence on food matters (Craig and Truswell, 1994), preparing meals that are befitting for men to prepare, such as barbecues, Sunday breakfasts or specialities (Williams, 1997). But the tide of public opinion is changing where a more equal division of domestic labour within households is commonly espoused, even if the reality falls short of the aspiration (Elliott, 2005).

Gender differences exist regarding values, meanings and beliefs about food. Women have been assumed generally to be more knowledgeable about food than men and to

possess a greater awareness regarding the topics of nutrition and health as well as an interest in dietary change (Barker *et al.*, 1995; Rappoport *et al.*, 1993). In respect of changing to a healthier diet, women are described as both “innovators” and “mediators” (Fagerli and Wandel, 1999). These food-related gender differences may be simply because in society women are socialised to be rational (Fagerli and Wandel, 1999), while men are allowed to be hedonistic (Courtenay, 2000).

Gender differences have been shown to be related to attitudes and understanding of food and healthy eating. This paper describes the living arrangements of a sample in their 30s located mainly within the northeast of England. This paper discusses gender differences according to food purchasing and preparation responsibility, with a focus on shared households.

Background to the study and methods

Participants had consented to take part in a follow-up within a longitudinal dietary study in Northumberland, northeast England – the ASH30 study (Lake *et al.*, 2004). In 1979-1980, when aged 12-13 years, they had participated in a school-based dietary study; in 2000-2001, the time of the current follow-up, they were 32-33 years old. A total of 198 participants responded to a 21-item questionnaire combining closed, Likert-scale and open-ended questions. The questionnaire was piloted with sample of hospital cleaning staff of a similar age and modified before being given to participants. The questionnaire was given to participants coincident with the collection of a food diary. A verbal explanation of how to complete the questionnaire was given, and it was left for self-completion.

This paper examines a sub-section of the questionnaire regarding responses to questions about the participants current food purchasing and preparation practices. Two closed questions sought to define responsibility for food purchasing and preparation.

- (1) Are you the person mainly responsible for food shopping for your household?
- (2) Are you the person mainly responsible for food preparation and cooking for your household?

Statistical analysis was carried out using SPSS version 10 (SPSS Inc., Surrey England). Chi-squared analysis identified relationships between variables.

The two open-ended questions regarding food purchasing and preparation were:

- (1) Why are you mainly responsible for food shopping for your household?
- (2) Why are you mainly responsible for food preparation and cooking for your household?

Responses to the open-ended questions were subjected to content analysis (Krippendorff, 1980) using QSR N5 NUD*IST (2000 QSR International Pty Ltd. ABN 47 006 357 213 Australia). The coding framework was refined and stabilised by inter-researcher agreement and discussion following two independent analyses of the data.

Socio-economic classification was coded according to the ONS Standard Occupational Classification coding index (Office for National Statistics, 2000).

Ethical approval was obtained from the UK Multi Research Ethics Committee and from 50 local research ethics committees representing the range of locations of the participants in 2000.

Findings

The respondents

In this sample of 198 32-33 year olds, there was a significantly higher proportion of female compared with male respondents (59 per cent versus 41 per cent; Table I). The majority of the sample were still located in Northumberland (78 per cent) with 22 per cent living elsewhere in the UK.

The majority of respondents were living with partners (77 per cent of men and 80 per cent of women) and over half were living with both a partner and children (53 per cent of all respondents). A total of 52 respondents lived only with their partner; a higher percentage of these were men (30 per cent compared with 24 per cent of women). A total of 11 respondents, of whom eight were women, lived only with their children.

A total of 9 per cent of the respondents lived alone, and 1 per cent were living with other people, e.g. house sharing. Small proportions of the male and female respondents (6 and 5 per cent respectively) were living with their parents in 2000. The qualitative work in this paper focuses mainly on those living in shared households.

Respondents were distributed across the nine socio-economic classifications. Most respondents were in the "lower managerial/professional" socio-economic classification (24 per cent), followed by 18 per cent in the "intermediate" classification (Table II). The majority of the respondents were working full time (69 per cent) while 22 per cent were working part time.

Food shopping

Within the whole sample ($n = 198$), a significantly higher proportion of female than male participants claimed that they were mainly responsible for their household's food shopping (79 per cent compared with 38 per cent; $\chi^2 = 45.5$; $p < 0.001$). When queried

| | Male | | Female | | Total | |
|---|----------|----|----------|----|----------|-----|
| | <i>n</i> | % | <i>n</i> | % | <i>n</i> | % |
| Total and percentage of total | 81 | 41 | 117 | 59 | 198 | 100 |
| Living in Northumberland or Tyne and Wear | 60 | 74 | 94 | 80 | 154 | 78 |
| Living elsewhere in the UK | 21 | 26 | 23 | 20 | 44 | 22 |
| Living with anyone ^a | 71 | 88 | 109 | 93 | 180 | 91 |
| Living alone | 10 | 12 | 8 | 7 | 18 | 9 |
| Living with others ^b | 2 | 3 | 0 | 0 | 2 | 1 |
| Living with parents | 5 | 6 | 3 | 3 | 8 | 4 |
| Living with partners (total) | 62 | 77 | 94 | 80 | 156 | 79 |
| Living with children and partner | 38 | 47 | 66 | 56 | 104 | 53 |
| Living with children only | 2 | 3 | 9 | 8 | 11 | 6 |
| Living with partner only | 24 | 30 | 28 | 24 | 52 | 26 |
| Living with parents and children | 0 | 0 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 1 |
| Living with parents and siblings | 0 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 |

Table I.
Descriptive statistics of
the ASH30 respondents
by gender

Notes: ^aAnyone includes parents, partners, children or other people; ^bOthers includes all others apart from parents, partners and children

| National socio-economic classification (<i>n</i> = 198) | <i>n</i> | % |
|--|----------|----|
| Large employers/higher managerial | 19 | 10 |
| Higher professional | 22 | 11 |
| Lower managerial/professional | 47 | 24 |
| Intermediate | 36 | 18 |
| Small employers/own account | 17 | 9 |
| Lower supervisory/technical | 23 | 12 |
| Semi-routine | 11 | 6 |
| Routine | 16 | 8 |
| Never worked/long term unemployed | 6 | 3 |
| No response | 1 | 1 |

Source: Office for National Statistics (2000)

Table II.
National socio-economic
classification for the
ASH30 respondents

about the involvement of others in food shopping, significantly more women (58 per cent) than men (24 per cent) claimed that they were solely responsible for the food shopping ($\chi^2 = 39.4$; $p < 0.001$).

Food preparation and cooking

Significantly more women (72 per cent) than men (37 per cent) stated that they were mainly responsible for preparing and cooking the food ($\chi^2 = 25.6$; $p < 0.001$). More than twice as many women compared with men stated that they alone were responsible for food preparation and cooking (42 per cent compared with 20 per cent; $\chi^2 = 23.6$; $p < 0.001$). Other individuals involved in food preparation and cooking included, mothers (2), parents (2), grandmother (1) and girlfriends (4). Two respondents identified restaurants to be involved in their food preparation and cooking.

Responsibility for food shopping and preparation

Figure 1 illustrates that 101 respondents (51 per cent) were responsible for both food shopping and preparation, of these the majority were women (78 compared with 23 men). A total of 25 individuals (13 per cent) were responsible for shopping alone (eight male, 17 female) and 11 (6 per cent) for preparation alone (seven male, four female). A total of 61 respondents (31 per cent) did not consider themselves to have a role in food shopping and preparation (18 female, 43 male).

Participants who stated that they were responsible for their household's food shopping and food preparation and cooking completed two open-ended questions, described earlier. A total of 94 women (80 per cent of females) answered the question regarding food shopping, in contrast with 31 men (38 per cent of males). A similar gender difference was seen for respondents to the question regarding food preparation and cooking, with 75 per cent of women compared with 38 per cent of men completing the open-ended question, indicating that the women in this sample were mainly responsible for food shopping and preparation.

The gender bias of responses, already seen to be significantly different, may give some early indication of the strong relationship between gender, food purchasing, preparation and cooking. In addition to gender, a number of key themes on these topics emerged from the responses.

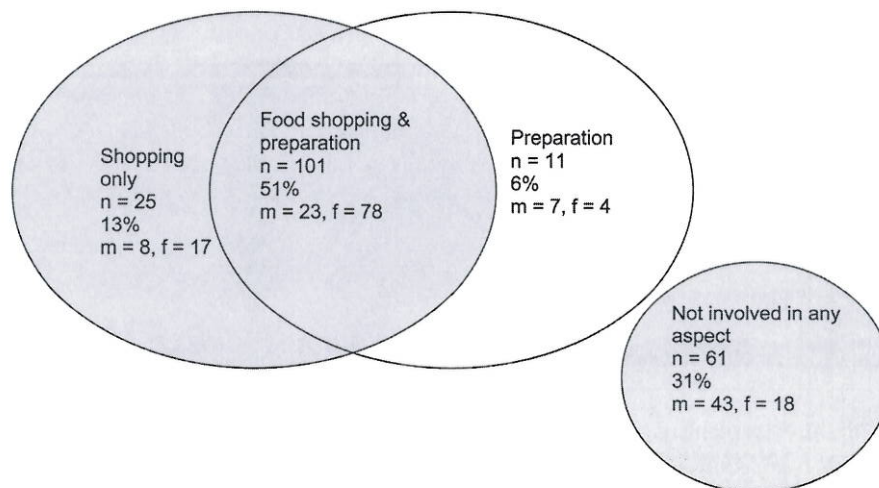


Figure 1.
Overlap between the food purchasers and preparers by gender

A total of 57 participants felt that aspects of employment were important factors in their ability to purchase, prepare and cook food. This has been divided according to the responses; thirteen (1 male, 12 females) participants described how their more flexible working hours made it “more convenient” to be responsible for food shopping (female). The only man in this group took responsibility due to two factors, his working hours and his wife’s lack of cooking skills:

Because of the hours I work and because the wife can’t cook very well (male).

In addition to flexible working hours, not working or having a partner who worked full-time were cited as reasons for being responsible (21 females) for cooking or shopping:

I have more time, my husband works long hours (female).

One male respondent was responsible for shopping at the weekends when his partner worked:

Wife works at weekends so I have time at weekends to do the shopping (male).

Working part-time enabled nine women “to have more time to prepare and cook” (female), as they were spending “more time at home” than their husband (female). The role of food preparation was seen by some to be dependent upon who got home first to prepare meals (nine; two male, seven female).

Time was mentioned 35 times by 26 respondents when discussing their reasons for their responsibility for food shopping, preparation and cooking. As with “work”, a higher proportion of women (22: 19 per cent) than men (four: 5 per cent) mentioned time in their response. Most responses related to having more time than their partner to purchase and prepare foods, though this could mean that their partner was not as skilled as them in either food shopping or preparation so that the task then required more time:

I have more time than my husband and would probably end up going back to the shop myself later in week (female).

Possessing the necessary skills to shop was associated with their partner's inability to purchase healthy foods:

Feel I choose healthier food than my husband and take more time looking at contents etc. (female).

Men were thought to lack the skills necessary to cook food healthily (female) and to be tempted by "unnecessary 'treats'!!" (female). Having to write a list for a partner was perceived as requiring more time than actually shopping themselves (female) when they could "do the shopping faster". This was seen to be necessary "when time is precious!!" (female).

In general, women perceived themselves as more time efficient than men in food-related tasks:

More time more able – good results less mess, much quicker (female).

From the male view point, there was the notion that they had an interest in cooking when more time was available, while their partner made "basic foods":

Take more interest in cooking when I have time. Spouse normally opts for basic meals when cooking (male).

Male responsibility for specialist cooking was echoed by another response:

Being mainly responsible for cooking I can choose the ingredients we eat. I can also buy what I want (sounds selfish but I usually buy the extravagant stuff and my partner buys the essentials) (male).

The role of the female partner was to maintain "basic" and "essential" provisions, although that opinion was not held universally:

Because I will take the time to cook a meal, rather than open the freezer to see what can quickly be cooked in the oven (female).

This idea of being more skilled in food-related tasks featured in 38 responses by 34 participants to both questions. Only six men (7 per cent of men) were responsible for food shopping and preparation, because they were more skilled than their female partner:

I'm a chef. I prepare meals and put them in the fridge, i.e. stews and soups etc., these are for my partner and daughter when I'm not there (female).

A higher proportion of women (24 per cent of females) stated that they had the responsibility for these tasks because they were more skilled than their partners in planning, budgeting, preparing and knowing their family's food preferences. Planning meals was mentioned by 13 respondents (four males, nine females):

... Also when my husband does the shopping he does not plan ahead for meals and so fails to get enough shopping and so have to make return trips ... (female).

I seem to be better at planning for a whole week's groceries. My spouses shopping has rarely lasted beyond two days (female).

As well as being capable of planning ahead, some respondents claimed that they were better at costing meals:

Because if husband goes he spends about £200 and there is nothing to make a meal from (female).

Four women reported that they were responsible for food preparation and cooking because they knew what their children and partner enjoyed eating.

In addition to being more skilled, 29 respondents indicated that they were responsible for food preparation and cooking because they enjoyed it (21 per cent women compared with 6 per cent of men):

I enjoy doing a big Tesco shop – I can switch off from the children! (female).

Responsibility for food-related tasks was reported by a female respondent to be a “woman’s job” (female):

Because my husband is still under the impression it is a woman’s job. If I ask him to get anything he will do so unwillingly the first time or on occasions but would not do this regularly. Also he could not go shopping alone as he would not think to get everything like cleaning stuff/washing up as he wouldn’t think about it without being prompted (female).

There was the sense that this respondent was struggling with her husband’s beliefs about gender roles and his ability to shop, which was echoed in three other responses from women:

Women’s task (oh dear) ... (female).

I don’t really know, probably because I’m female (female).

Because my husband is still under the impression it is a woman’s job ... (female).

In contrast, 31 responses indicated that these tasks were shared between partners:

50/50 split on responsibility. Spouse and I both have similar time constraints due to work and we share the shopping (male).

When shopping together there appeared to be some negotiation about what to buy, rather than it being controlled by one individual:

Both myself and my partner go shopping together and normally agree on what to buy (male).

Even when responsibility was shared women commented that there was a temptation still to be involved:

... Because I cook regularly I can do it more efficiently. I enjoy cooking but can find everyday meals a chore. Even so I find it difficult not to interfere and comment on my husband’s efforts (female).

A total of 26 respondents (16 per cent of men and 11 per cent of women) mentioned task division where each partner performed their own role:

Both my husband and myself work full-time. This is just one of the tasks which fall to me in the division of household chores. We do quite often, carry out the main weekly shop together (female).

Division of labour – I am a better cook and enjoy preparing tasty food. My spouse does other tasks around the home (female).

The open-ended responses described here have focused on shared households. As Table I indicates, there were a number of other living arrangements, including individuals living alone and lone parents. A total of 18 individuals lived alone, double the proportion of men than women (12 and 7 per cent respectively), which meant that responsibility for food lay with them:

If I didn't shop I would slowly die!! (live on my own) (male).

There were 11 lone parents (nine women) who as the only adult in the household were solely responsible for the food shopping and preparation:

I am the adult in the house who buys foods and cooks it. If the children are left to choose then they would live on chips (female).

Respondents perceived reasons regarding their responsibility for food-related tasks have been summarised in Table III.

Discussion

This study shows that food purchasing and preparation within shared households remains a heavily gendered issue and appears still to be a female dominated domain. Although the ASH30 sample described in this paper were largely a homogeneous group of white individuals, the work describes the food-related habits of a sample of adults in their 30s living in the UK.

The sample consisted of a range of living arrangements – representative of the variation reported within the UK. The sample's proportion of lone parents (6 per cent) and the dominance of female lone parents are in agreement with National Statistics findings (ONS, 2004). The average age of the ASH30 respondents was 32.5 years, closer to the females in UK average age at marriage (32 years) than the male average age at marriage (35 years) (ONS, 2004).

In shared households, Charles and Kerr (1988) described the provision of meals for children and men as an important female role within the family ideology. While the majority of ASH30 female respondents did exercise such a function, acceptance of this traditional female role as "food provider" for the family was expressed by only a

| Reason for responsibility | Female | | Male | |
|------------------------------------|----------|----|----------|----|
| | <i>n</i> | % | <i>n</i> | % |
| Not working | 21 | 18 | 1 | 1 |
| Flexible working hours | 12 | 10 | 1 | 1 |
| Working part-time | 9 | 8 | 0 | 0 |
| First home | 7 | 6 | 2 | 2 |
| Issues of time | 22 | 19 | 4 | 5 |
| More skilled at food related tasks | 28 | 24 | 6 | 7 |
| Ability to plan meals | 9 | 8 | 4 | 5 |
| Enjoyment of food related tasks | 24 | 21 | 5 | 6 |
| Food related tasks shared | 13 | 11 | 13 | 16 |
| Lived alone | 8 | 7 | 8 | 10 |

Table III.
Summary of reasons for
responsibility for food
related tasks

minority of females, as outlined in the results. Rather than accepting food-related tasks as being “a woman’s job”, 34 respondents believed they had this responsibility as they were more skilled in the task. In a Scottish sample of a similar age (22 couples, 19-33 years) the shopping responsibility fell predominately to the female respondents (Marshall and Anderson, 2000). These results were echoed in the ASH30 study where some men were seen as incapable of carrying out the task of shopping.

A total of 26 respondents (13 per cent) in this study mentioned sharing tasks, which is similar to Kemmer’s (1999) findings and was described by these respondents as a sensible, almost obvious arrangement. The assumption that men take an interest in more specialist cooking while women concentrate on the day-to day cooking was highlighted by this response:

Take more interest in cooking when I have time. Spouse normally opts for basic meals when cooking (male).

Echoing Kemmer’s (1999) findings, this illustrates how for men involved in cooking it may be regarded as a “hobby” rather than as a “chore”. While for such men cooking is a domestic task that involves creativity (Swinbank, 2002), women, on the other hand, do not appear to have this luxury of choice. Women in this study were mainly responsible for food-related tasks for a number of reasons but especially due to issues of work and time as summarised in Table III.

The ASH30 respondents have lived through a period of considerable economic and social transformation in the UK (Bynner *et al.*, 1997) which has been particularly marked in the northeast of England, where since the early 1980s structural changes have taken place in society with respect to the gendered relationship of men, women and food-related tasks. By the 1980s, secondary schools were making home economics available to both sexes, though actual take-up by boys was quite limited (Millman and Weiner, 1985).

More women are in the labour market altering, to an extent, the traditional family structure. With the break down of “rigid gendering of employment and domestic roles” (Kemmer, 2000) the division of food-related tasks appears to have been unaffected. The data described in this study were collected in 2000-2001 at a time of heightened popularity and interest in food, cooking and the emergence of the celebrity chef. An example is Jamie Oliver, whose influence is said to have made cooking “recognizably manly” through association with “recognizable masculinities” (Hollows, 2003). The observations made in this sample, whose parents probably led very “traditional” lives with regard to their gendered roles, could be described as a dynamic situation which will have changed considerably over a generation in this part of the northeast of England.

The opinions of the ASH30 respondents were collected at a point in their life-cycle when most were living with their partners and/or children. There was considerable evidence of the persistence of “rigid” gender roles. Division of food-related tasks was evident but only by a small proportion of respondents (13 per cent). This argument may be fuelled by the fact that the women in this study had a more active interest in nutrition, food and health and perceived themselves as more capable compared with their male partners.

While Kemmer advises against excluding men from research related to food in the home, the findings from this study, in agreement with those of Murcott (2000), show

that although food purchasing and preparation does involve both genders it is still a predominately female task in shared households. So in answer to the question posed by Murcott, "Is it still a pleasure to cook for him?" the response "whether with or without much pleasure, women are still most likely to be cooking for him" (Murcott, 2000) clearly applies to this sample of "30-somethings".

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Corresponding author

Amelia A. Lake can be contacted at: amelia.lake@ncl.ac.uk
