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Eating with children: a practice theoretical study of foodwork in transitioning to parenthood

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores how the transition to parenthood reshapes foodwork in families by drawing on ethnographic, longitudinal research conducted with parents of young children in the south-east of England. It utilizes the conceptual framework offered by practice theory and unpacks how parents' interpretations, techniques, and emotions surrounding eating transform as feeding and eating become routinized. The findings demonstrate the profound influence of feeding young children on the perception and practice of commensality at home. Mealtimes are increasingly recognized as crucial moments for transmitting manners and tastes across generations. Moreover, the analysis reveals that caregiving and other practices have a ripple effect on adults' eating practices, leading to changes in their food priorities, meal schedules, practical arrangements, and even the division of labor along gender lines. The findings underline the complexity of implementing institutional advice, for instance on "good" child feeding, as it requires changes in parents' own food practices and emotional relationships with food. By emphasizing the lived experiences of practitioners, this paper supports the growing call to incorporate identities, such as gender, into practice theoretical analysis, ultimately enhancing our understanding of how practices evolve and endure.

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Introduction

Becoming a parent is considered to be an important life transition in an adult's life, especially in Euro-American contexts, where parenting norms demand significant changes in social and personal routines. Food practices are not an exception to this. Once parents take on the responsibility of feeding young children, some of their habitualized eating practices are broken and then remade (e.g., Raskind et al 2017). These changes take place in a neoliberal, individualized culture of care that exposes parents to seemingly endless guidelines, recommendations, and surveillance regarding healthy feeding and good parenting (Brenton 2017). There are various streams of literature tracing these changes from different perspectives. For instance, research stemming from nutritional science looks at the changes in parental dietary intake (e.g., Edvardsson et al. 2011), whereas sociological studies emerging from the global North

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look at how foodwork roles are renegotiated (Cairns and Johnston 2015). In the case of the latter, the focus has expanded from what children are being fed to the dynamics of foodwork, a term that encompasses the complete range of visible and invisible processes associated with nourishing the family, including the strategic planning and coordination of various food-related practices (O'Connell and Brannen 2016, Torckeli et al., 2023). However, we still understand very little about how the transition to eating with children is lived and experienced. How do adults' eating practices change after having children? What can looking at this stage closely tell us about the dynamics of eating practices, and how they have been theorized? In what ways do parents' social interactions and their identities shape this transition? To address these questions in depth, this paper draws on ethnographic, longitudinal research conducted in the south-east of England.

In recent decades, there has been growing interest in the structures of practices among consumption scholars. In particular, policy-oriented research on sustainable consumption has sought to understand how practices are routinized. This has led to the development of the practice theoretical approach, which draws on classical theories of social practices (e.g., Giddens 1984) tailored for empirical research on consumption (e.g., Warde, 2005). Practice theory offers a unique lens through which to examine how particular practices are shaped by social relations, contexts, and infrastructure. It also emphasizes how seemingly unrelated practices, such as work and eating, are interlinked. However, few studies have focused on processes whereby practices are practically and relationally un-done and re-done in times of life transitions (for exceptions: Burningham and Venn 2020; Burningham et al. 2014; Plessz et al. 2022). Life transitions are considered particularly interesting due to their assumed potential to trigger a shift toward more sustainable consumption. This study draws on the conceptual tools that practice theory offers – namely *understandings*, *procedures*, and *engagements*— but it explores how food practices change more broadly as eating and feeding become routinized in the process of learning to eat with children.

This paper begins with a summary of how different streams of research, and particularly nutritional science, consumption studies, and food parenting studies, approach this transition. Subsequently, the affordances of practice theory and the conceptual tools upon which the present study draws are introduced. After presenting the data collection methods, the paper moves on to an exploration of the changes that emerged from the data by using the practice theoretical concepts of *understandings*, *procedures*, and *engagements* as analytical tools. The concluding discussion explores how findings on the lived experience of such transitions can contribute to streams of research that are cross-fertilized at the beginning.

Food with children

Transitions are often seen as catalysts for triggering behavioral change. The transition to parenthood is a key example, with the potential to exert lasting impacts on adults' eating habits. Research on dietary changes in the transition to parenthood has demonstrated systematic shifts in the types of food consumed; however, the findings are somewhat contradictory. For instance, Raskind et al. (2017) studied women's grocery decision-making processes in the U.S. and found that nutrition was more frequently discussed by participants who had children compared to those who did not. The underlying motive is

often to ensure that children do not repeat the habits parents developed in their own childhoods and thus divert family histories of obesity (Johnson et al., 2011). There is some evidence that these shifts in motivation translate into actual “improvements” in dietary patterns in the form of increased fruit and vegetable intake (Edvardsson et al. 2011, Olson, 2005, Smith et al., 2017). However, other empirical studies found what they called a “child effect” (Laroche et al., 2013) associated with more frequent consumption of discretionary foods, leading to an increase in total energy (Elstgeest, Mishra, and Dobson 2012, Wennberg et al., 2016). More refined analyses demonstrate that the transition to parenthood influences parents in different ways depending on their backgrounds and established habits. For instance, Moura and Aschemann-Witzel (2020) showed that while having a child motivated “unhealthy” eaters to make dietary “improvements”, it imposed challenges for “healthy” eaters in maintaining their positive food habits. Dietary studies provide some insight into how the transition to parenthood can change adults’ food consumption habits. However, the perspective they offer is rather limited as they rely on binary conceptualizations and solely on the types of food consumed.

In addition to recalibrating nutritional concerns, the transition to parenthood can be argued to have an impact on the symbolic value attributed to food in the family. After having children, family food practices become a site for the intergenerational transmission of tastes and an area in which to “produce” the family. Through enacting notions of how to feed their children, parents contribute to the embodiment of diverse food tastes and practices. Anving and Sallerberg (2010) use the term “demarcation” to describe the process whereby children’s tastes are aligned with the rest of the family to avoid parallel meals. While certain elements of this demarcation happen unconsciously, most parents intentionally apply explicit cultural rules and knowledge, which may be tacit in other contexts (Paugh, 2005). There is a wealth of literature demonstrating how structural conditions, particularly social class, shape the ideals parents seek to instill in their children (e.g., Karademir-Hazır, 2021, Oncini 2019, Wright et al. 2015). Although food dispositions vary across social classes, their transmission occurs through a similar process. Children’s capacity to acquire values is channeled into family tastes through routine experiences with close family members (Ochs & Kremer-Sadlik, 2008). This means that parents shape their children’s repertoires not only through isolated feeding practices but also through activities such as shopping, cooking, eating, and discussing food with their children. This happens in a context where food routines are temporally and spatially shaped to make meals an organizing force in family life (DeVault 1994, Brannen, O’Connell, and Mooney 2013). Specifically, dinners begin to be regarded as sacred moments when all family members engage in meaningful social interactions, free from distractions. It is important to note that the construction of the family meal in the West as such carries normative status and often reflects idealized notions rather than actual lived experiences (Wilk, 2010). Many factors, such as changes in work conditions and increased women’s participation in the workforce, are considered to make intra-household coordination more challenging, leading to a “destruction” of mealtimes and a tendency for a decline in the time spent eating with household members (e.g., Cheng et al. 2007; Mestdag 2005). However, as demonstrated by Yates and Warde’s large-scale study (2017), the level of domestic commensality remains remarkably high in Britain, indicating the enduring symbolic significance of eating as a family. Also worth noting is that the transmission is not a linear process. Flexibility in incorporating children into family meals is evident, allowing them to explore new flavors. This is apparent

through increased meal variety, evolving notions of proper meals, and the inclusion of different dishes. Part of this process involves reverse socialization, where various dishes are prepared to cater to children's tastes (Marshall, 2018, Ochs and Beck, 2013).

When eating becomes a site for intergenerational transmission and a major component of "doing family", its emotional management becomes more complex. With the arrival of children, family food practices and habits become more vulnerable to surveillance and judgment. Amid concerns over child obesity and food safety, parents' feeding practices are subject to intense public and private scrutiny. It is generally recognized that this process is highly gendered (e.g., Elliott, Powell, and Brenton 2015; Brenton 2017). The responsabilizing discourses underpinning media and public health campaigns portray mothers as the gatekeepers of children's health (Cairns and Johnston 2015). This creates what Brenton (2017) calls an "intensive feeding ideology", or the widespread belief that good mothering requires intensive food labor, which in turn shapes the construction of a culturally valued feminine identity. This idealized stereotype generates stigmatized moral opposites, such as "McDonald's mums", by criticizing particular groups of women for foodwork that is deemed to be irresponsible. However, other versions of maternal foodwork are also stigmatized, as in images of overbearing, health-obsessed "organic mums" (Cairns, Johnston, and Oleschuk 2018). After transitioning to parenthood, women must learn to "calibrate" their performances of maternal femininity and negotiate their identities against the backdrop of various foodwork stereotypes (Cairns, Johnston, and Oleschuk 2018). It is known that women are typically positioned as "food gatekeepers" from the beginning of co-habitation, even before having children (Bove & Sobal 2006). However, the transition to parenthood potentially intensifies the gendered division of labor, given that the organization of children's feeding and adults' eating are inseparable in the context of everyday food provision. For instance, in an article titled "It's just easier for me to do it", Beagan et al. (2008) showed that, in Canada, alongside other seemingly gender-neutral rationales, concerns about children's health are considered to be a reason for viewing foodwork as women's work. This supports the findings in the broader literature on parenting and the division of labor; for instance, in a longitudinal study, Miller (2011) showed how women and men tend to fall back into normative gendered behaviors after transitioning to parenthood.

Nutritional science, food parenting studies, and consumption research all point to important aspects of foodwork that are renegotiated after transitioning to parenthood. However, owing to the limitations of their primary focuses (e.g., health, class, or gender), they do not support explorations of how eating and feeding practices shape each other. The following section will discuss how practice theory can be utilized to unpack different stages and moments of routinization and capture the lived experience of this particular transition.

Practice theory and life transitions

Identifying the mechanisms of social change has been a central aim for many social science sub-disciplines, and especially those concerned with the environmental impacts of consumption and climate change policies. Perspectives drawn from behavioral economics and social psychology have been applied to create models of behavior enabling effective intervention strategies. Through the lenses of these perspectives, the transition

to parenthood can be considered as a window of opportunity for changing “undesirable” practices, such as the consumption of prepackaged processed foods. In such formulations, behaviors are seen as the outcomes of rational calculation processes and also as direct products of individuals’ values (Hargreaves, 2011, Evans 2011). As Hargreaves (2011) suggested, these models of “behavioral correction” have remained in circulation because they offer more straightforward and practical solutions for policy-makers. However, distinctively sociological accounts have underlined how particular practices are shaped by social relations, contexts, and infrastructures (Shove, 2003, Southerton et al., 2004). Such studies have aimed to address the limitations of individualistic approaches and draw on social practice theories, which propose that individuals’ actions and perspectives are embedded within the social ordering of practices. They also underscore the interdependence of practices such as eating and feeding, as well as the importance of studying the juxtaposition of their seemingly unrelated routines.

Early approaches to practice theory drew on classical studies commonly founded on a rejection of analyses based on models of either *Homo economicus* or *Homo sociologicus* (e.g., Bourdieu 1977, Giddens 1984). More recently, Reckwitz (2002) and Schatzki (1996) initiated a second wave of practice theories and laid new philosophical foundations for an explicit theory that puts practices at the core of all social conduct (Halkier et al 2011). These rather abstract theories were synthesized and tailored for empirical consumption studies by scholars looking at various aspects of consumption, including eating (Darmon and Warde 2019), cooking (Truninger, 2011), food waste (Evans 2012), and climate change (Shove, 2010). To unpack how practices are sustained, this stream of research draws on Schatzki’s (1996) definition of practices as made up of organized nexuses of different elements. Warde (2005) specified these elements as 1) *understandings*, 2) *procedures*, and 3) *engagements*. *Understandings* is composed of general understandings, which make up the ideational elements common to multiple practices, and practical understandings that carry the sense of how to proceed with an activity. *Procedures* are explicit rules and principles that can potentially take the form of “instructions”, while *engagements* are emotions, beliefs, and norms that create particular orientations and constitute the purposive elements of practices. For a practice to be routinized, the nexus requires regular enactments. Halkier and Jensen (2011) offered the example of grabbing a sandwich for lunch on the go to show what these three elements refer to in empirical research. The eating practice of a quick meal on the go is organized by *understandings* of eating such as “food is fuel for the body”. It is further shaped by *procedures* for eating, such as using take-away options instead of sitting down. There should also be a motivation for this practice to become established, or *engagements*, such as the notion of “getting it over and being done with it”.

In times of life transitions (e.g., retirement), there will be inevitable changes in the ways in which *understandings*, *procedures*, and *engagements* are interlocked within given practices. During these periods, orchestrating the performances of compound practices like eating, which is formed by the articulation of various practices (such as feeding, shopping, and cleaning up), may be perceived as difficult and certain routines will inevitably break down. Recent contributions from practice theoretical approaches illustrate how the ongoing coordination of food-related activities necessitates adjustments, not only during moments of life transitions but also in everyday routines. For instance, Torkkeli et al. (2023) delve into the intricacies of coordinating foodwork by analyzing cooking videos recorded by five Finnish families. Their analysis of coordination involves

examining the interactions among participants, various experiences, and the sequences of material and temporal activities. They discover that because coordination is a dynamic process, parents must adapt their foodwork practices to meet the needs of family members within the context of social practices. This adaptation process is characterized by six key adjustment themes in parental foodwork: appropriateness, sequences, synchronization, duties, significance, and acceptance. Their analysis reveals that appropriateness and sequences pertain to the organization of materials; synchronization and duties relate to the timing of activities; and significance and acceptance add nuance to interpersonal relationships. The benefit of practice theory is that it shows how these adjustments are guided, challenged, and facilitated by the understandings, procedures, and engagements that surround family food practices.

However, this approach decentralizes the point of analysis from the individual agent and their identities, considering the practice as the fundamental unit of study (Southerton et al., 2009). In this formulation, individuals are carriers and also the unique intersection of many different practices in everyday life (Mechlenborg and Gram-Hanssen 2020, p. 5). The conceptual framework discourages the consideration of the role played by aspects of practitioners' identities (e.g., gender, class, or ethnicity). However, there is a recent interest in exploring such aspects of identity as they are integral to the performance of practices. For example, Mechlenborg and Gram-Hanssen (2020) argue that gender should be considered a general *understanding* that permeates multiple practices, as it is performed while carrying out diverse practices. Similarly, Halkier invites us to explore social interactions between individuals (carriers of practices) to understand the coordination involved in the processes of food provisioning, cooking, and eating in everyday life (Halkier, 2020, 402). There is also a call to consider "the reflexive individual and their capacity for evaluative engagement with their own practices" (Welch et al., 2020, 328). The analysis presented in this paper will contribute to this debate and acknowledge that an exploration of the orchestration of practices requires examining practitioners' social interactions and aspects of their identities. It will also engage with the growing body of practice-theoretical research on life transitions, extending its application beyond the context of sustainable consumption (e.g., Burningham and Venn 2020; Plessz et al. 2022).

Data and methods

The analysis presented in this paper draws on an ethnographic and longitudinal project that looked at child feeding practices in the south-east of England. As part of the project, I conducted go-along interviews with 12 families across various settings in three different stages (Kusenbach 2018). The gap between each interview was 6 to 9 months. Each family had at least one child between the ages of one and a half and four years at the time of recruitment. Among the families, five were closer to a working-class position due to their economic circumstances. These families were single-earner households, with the main earner holding blue-collar employment status. The other seven families demonstrated high levels of cultural capital, with both parents having university or postgraduate degrees. None of the families in the sample can be considered to be experiencing economic deprivation. Five families in the sample consisted of cross-national couples. Fathers were actively involved in the interviews for six of the families.

In the first interview, we focused on how feeding practices changed after the interviewees had children and the establishment of new routines. Interviewees prepared lunch during the interviews, which we shared with their children to facilitate discussion. For the second interview, we met at the interviewees' regular supermarket and did their weekly shopping together. This time, the emphasis was on understanding their routines, but questions encouraged participants to reflect on how the presence of their children affected their priorities. We met for the last time 18–24 months after the first interview and discussed how interviewees' food routines changed as the children grew. In total, I conducted 36 interviews, each lasting between one and four hours. I recruited the families using established local networks and distributed posters in family centers. All interviews were transcribed by a professional transcriber and anonymized with pseudonyms for analysis prior to coding. I took pictures of the lunch served where permission was granted and made detailed field notes after each visit to capture aspects that would not be recorded by the voice recording, such as the general mood and areas that the parents showed particular enthusiasm for. These provided context to the interview and served as reminders, which proved to be essential when the data collection stage was finally completed. However, the systematic analysis only draws from the interview transcripts.

Inspired by Grossoehme and Lipstein's (2016) approach to data analysis in medical qualitative longitudinal research, I employed trajectory analysis on the data collected in three stages. Such analysis relies on time-ordered displays (or sequential matrices), allowing the researcher to understand "what led to what." To achieve this, I coded the data from each stage inductively using descriptive first-level codes, such as "food refusal," "family recipes," "temporal coordination," and "developing a taste." These codes then merged into broader themes, such as "eating together." I compared and contrasted the contexts within which these themes emerged across the three stages to identify the dynamics of change over time. To systematically analyze the trajectory of change, I grouped the themes that relate to the three components of practices: understandings, procedures, and engagements. Some themes appeared in more than one component; for instance, "eating together" is explored under understandings, where it refers to embodied routines, as well as under procedures, where it refers to the organizational changes that occurred in communal eating. The analysis will be presented using a tripartite structure, revealing how themes related to each element can transform over time.

Results

Adjusted understandings: changing meaning of eating together

Understandings are embodied know-how or routines, with the body knowing how to act or what to say and do. These accumulate through a long process of socialization and teach the practitioner how to appreciate things. As discussed above, accepting food as the "glue" of the social unit, or as something more than just fuel, is one such embodied *understanding* that holds eating practices together in various different conditions. This was articulated explicitly by all parents while talking about how they organized their food routines prior to having children. Some referred to the romantic aspect of eating together as a couple, highlighting how they learned to "treat" their loved ones with food. Sometimes this translated into cooking favorite meals for the significant other or cooking

together to demonstrate affection. However, these practices had to be altered after having children as new parents encountered practical challenges in creating time for bonding over food. For instance, Emma, the mother of two young children, reflected:

... Uhm, I think me and my husband cooked more together, before. I think that now we cook less together, because he tends to be with the children while I cook, or I tend to be with the children while he cooks. Uhm, I think that before... I think that was something that we did quite a lot. To kind of cook a meal for, for the two of us, together. We used to enjoy that a lot. Yeah.

In a similar vein, while explaining how their routines changed after having children, Emily referred to a past when eating together was central to their sense of themselves as a couple. She used the past tense while explaining how they used to treat each other to the things they knew the other person liked, often with the aim of nurturing romantic feelings. Some interviewees suggested that eating together as a couple facilitated bonding because, without children, it was more easily integrated with other social practices and became flexibly ritualized. Take-away movie nights and dine-in date nights with wine and pizza were among some of the examples couples gave when asked about their relationships with food prior to having children. The interviews made it clear that, for all parents involved, having to feed young children made a significant impact on how commensality was practiced at home. This does not mean that the *understanding* of food as something more than fuel was broken altogether. However, the transition to parenthood required realigning this *understanding*: eating as a family became a valuable site for the intergenerational transmission of manners and tastes as well as an important time to “do” family. After having children, parents found themselves in a position of setting themselves up as role models for how to appreciate food. For instance, in Katie’s family, a transition in understandings legitimized the changes she wanted to make in their commensal eating practices:

So, once we got married, for a while we took the habit of eating in the living room with dishes on our hands in front of TV... but I think that when we eat we should appreciate the food and... chat. So, after Amelia I’ve been able to insist that we always have family meals because the baby needs to learn that this is how you eat, and the importance of food.

Due to the small sample size, it is difficult to contextualize the internal variations within the data to specific family characteristics. However, it was observed that migrant couples (n: 5) assigned an additional function to commensality, which involved transmitting culinary traditions from their country of origin. During discussions on food routines and priorities, there were frequent comparisons between British food culture and the embodied habits of these families. Two families of Italian origin and two families of Turkish origin, in particular, referred broadly to a “Mediterranean culture” to explain their deviation from the conventional early dinner timing in the UK. They prioritized sustaining family dinners where food from their respective national cuisines was often shared. According to Schatzki (2002) and Yates and Warde (2017), general *understandings* are commonly shared beliefs and concerns that guide practices. Therefore, it is possible to observe that national cultural repertoires function as an *understanding* that threads through multiple practices, including the routinization of feeding and eating. For instance, after becoming a parent, Tina’s enthusiasm and commitment to cooking Italian dishes increased as she aimed to “training” her child’s senses with homemade Italian dishes.

I think being Italian has a lot to do on my approach to food . . . Because we are Italian, and we think that, you know “love goes through food,” so you feed the people you love. And if you don’t eat with your baby, she is not gonna know that you love her. She has to eat our food and she has to know that it is important for you. It is a bit Mediterranean I guess, “You have to feed your family” kind of thing. . .it’s food, but it’s not just food.

For most families, beginning to approach commensality as a site of cultural transmission led them to sacrifice their eating out or quick take-away practices. Findings from larger studies looking at time-use data across different countries concur with this observation. For instance, Hartmann et al. (2014) suggested that more time is being spent on eating in households with children, perhaps as a reaction to the moral panic about the decline of family meals. However, life with young children posits unique organizational challenges when shared meals begin to be seen as sites for food socialization. For instance, feeding schedules are heavily dependent on sleep routines, as well, resulting in a need to move evening meals forward. Steph explained the new dilemma she found herself in as follows:

Uhm, and, you know, a lot of what I was reading about, you know, I did agree with, you know, things like, trying to, trying to have a family meal time where you are all together and you are all having the same, so that. . . You know they’re sort of following good patterns of eating from the rest of the family. Uhm, I don’t know how easy that will be in practice, ‘cause you’ve got a little person who really needs to eat a bit earlier versus a dad who finishes work invariably late at some point, you know. He’ll probably be getting home from work more at bedtime than dinner time for Robin.

As practice theory suggests, each component of practice is interlocked in unique ways. The adjustment in the *understandings* of eating (commensality as a site for transmission) is underpinned by alteration in *engagements* (norms and values about family dinner) and also has implications for how the practice is carried out and lived (*procedures*). The next section looks more closely at *procedures* and the context within which parents are pressured into making these alterations.

Adjusted procedures: chaos at the dinner table

Once commensality begins to be understood as a site for intergenerational transmission, the *procedures* of eating tend to be framed more strictly as standalone activities (e.g., no simultaneous television), requiring family members to sit down around the table together at the same time. The extracts shared above show how interviewees viewed the supposed benefits of eating and feeding at the same time. However, the lived experience of this new procedural script may be messy and chaotic. As DeVault (1994) suggests, dinner time is idealized as a social gathering where meal talk takes place in a calm environment, whereas in reality “the setting is almost always chaotic and in some cases causes adults not to enjoy the food” (p. 50). Wilk’s study conducted in the U.S. also shows how dinner table became battleground, and “a scene for the exercise of power and authority, a place where conflict prevails” (Wilk 2010, 428).

Clare narrated this as follows:

The process of, like, the meal is so stressful at the moment. Chaotic . . . We always try and sit down together, but then, I, Leo will need help with cutting something or had, and then somebody needs to feed Lucas, and we want to, like, we can’t talk ‘cause everybody is. . . Uhm, so that’s always, I, in my head, I wanted it to be this really nice ritual that we do as

a family, and actually it is just, like, probably one of the most stressful times of the day [laughs]. So it will, and then, you know, and Lucas will be finished and like want to get down and cry and Leo won't, like at all, and Tom and I won't be able to have a conversation, because everybody is screaming or crying, talking at the same time, and like trying to eat . . .

In this life stage, with young children, feeding and eating at the same time disrupts some of the previously established *procedures*, such as the order in which food is consumed. The linearity of the movement from one dish to another, from starter to main course, breaks down, forcing parents to eat in a new, rather chaotic sequence. For instance, when we had dinner with James and Doris, Doris's soup was still untouched when James served the main dish. Doris then ate both in tandem and explained that this was something she is "*getting used to do since having children*". In that particular dinner observation, James and Doris found an opportunity to eat at the same time only for a few minutes. One parent had to be mobile for various reasons including fetching napkins, refilling knocked-over water cups, and replacing the toddler's spoon, which had fallen on the floor. There seemed to be a shift in how food was served and consumed, as well, with most parents commenting on how they had begun not bothering to reheat their food when it grew cold, just eating to get it over and done with, even though this contradicted their habitual ways of appreciating food. For some parents, the stress was so overwhelming that the new *procedures* turned dinner into "just another chore" (Devine et al. 2006).

Not surprisingly, the routinization of feeding and eating required parents to make changes in terms of the types of food served, especially for dinner. *Understanding commensality* as a tool for food socialization necessitated serving food that would be accepted and enjoyed by all members of the family. The changes in *procedures* that the interviewees experienced were much more nuanced as they negotiated different and often conflicting aims, such as expanding their children's palates, teaching them to appreciate "healthy" food, serving age-appropriate dishes, and minimizing the risk of food refusal. In these negotiations, parents often adopted new cooking skills, such as steaming, and tended to cut down on others that were deemed unhealthy, such as frying. For Anna and Ben, the transition to parenthood meant that they had to make changes to their previous meal repertoires:

On Saturdays we'd used to make our own shellfish pasta, so we'd buy the calamari fresh, cut it all up, and we'd buy the king prawns, and we haven't done that for ages. Just 'cause he couldn't eat, I don't think he'd eat that. Or we might give it to him and, you know, spend all that money and then he doesn't eat it, it's like oh, we gotta find something else for him. . . So, prefer to have stuff that he can eat as well. We've become less experimental, definitely, because of time constraints and money.

Other parents' narratives of transition resonated with Anna's to a large extent. Sitting down and eating together and serving food suitable for all meant that adults felt the need to set aside their established tastes and preferences, as well as their desires to try new foods. Like Anna, most parents complained that they had become less experimental and that the food they ate had become "dull". For instance, Tina commented that she kept following the same general menus, which she suggested had become rather boring, just to make sure that "*there are no fights or arguments at the dinner table*". These concerns were based on previous experiences early in the transition to parenthood. For example, Clare explained how she spent all afternoon making a home-made chicken pie that she and her

husband fancied but then felt very disappointed when their two young children refused to try it. She also claimed that her children liked “*really easy and boring stuff*” and were not willing to try “*any interesting spices and flavors*”. When prompted about their feeding principles, parents who had more resources suggested that they put effort into introducing their children to dishes from different cuisines, despite their children’s initial unwillingness, in order to enhance their palates. Other parents wanted to achieve that aim in order not to end up with fussy children. However, these principles were often pushed aside, given that parents’ foodwork sits at the intersection of a plurality of practices including shopping, cleaning, caring, parenting, and professional work, all of which are maneuvered on a day-to-day basis (Halkier & Jensen, 2011). This also resonates with the Burningham and Venn’s findings on their longitudinal research (2020) on new mothers; which highlights the provisional nature of aspirations for the future during transitions. To adjust their *procedures* according to their new routines, some parents tend to compromise. For instance, Emily said:

I remember the first time we tried to have a meal with Ava, this is probably before she was 18 months old, we looked to each other and we said “we are never gonna eat together ever again, this is never gonna happen, it’s broken, it’s not possible” . . . and I think it’s quite early on I’ve decided to eat my meals with her [i.e. before her husband arrives home]. And so I started to eat what she was having.

Each household routinizes their eating and feeding practices differently. Emily’s experience exemplifies how the *understanding* and *procedures* of eating changed after having children. The focus shifted toward intergenerational transmission and serving meals suitable for both children and adults, causing Emily to give up the types of food she and her partner used to enjoy. This finding aligns with Raskind et al. (2017) research, which suggests that women with children often face competing concerns, such as nutrition, that prioritize their children’s needs over their own taste preferences. The next section will explore how the transition to parenthood may impact the emotional aspects and division of labor within these practices.

Adjusted engagements: gendered implications of the emotional burden

Research suggests that the structure of the division of labor is becoming less gendered and that younger men are taking more responsibility in foodwork than previous cohorts in the West, for instance in the US (Schafer et al., 1999, Bianchi et al. 2000), especially among newly married couples (Bove and Sobal 2006, Marshall & Anderson, 2002). However, this division of labor is fluid; the responsibility for foodwork is something that is constantly negotiated and renegotiated by partners, and transitions are a key catalyst for the renegotiation of responsibilities. While transition into partnered life tends to trigger a more dynamic and egalitarian division of labor for younger cohorts, the transition to parenthood tends to require renegotiation. Responsibilizing discourses assign women the task of raising healthy children and instilling “good” eating habits in the next generation (Cairns and Johnston 2015). Most mothers accept the “gatekeeper” role in feeding practices, which inevitably reorders the existing division of foodwork labor in the family. The underlying feeling among our sample was that men are

“essentially” not as concerned about healthy feeding. For instance, when asked about her husband’s approach to child feeding, Jess said:

He did give her a tin of meatballs once. I took Lily for a playdate, friends, we came home, like I was late and I thought I came back and she was eating meatballs out of the tin. I’m like, “what have you given her?” [laughs] “She can’t have that.” [laughs] “Why did you give her that for?” [laughs] He won’t say it. [laughs] They’ll just, I think men eat very much whatever is easy. Just quick.

Throughout the interview, Jess stressed how her husband did not value the importance of offering children home-cooked non-processed meals, resulting in her taking on more responsibility in the domestic provision of food. In a similar vein, Steph complained that her husband did not have a sophisticated approach to food preparation and undermined the importance of variety. She referred to instances when her husband allowed their son to eat too much of the same food type (e.g., bananas), having consequences for the child’s digestive system. Victoria was also disappointed by her husband’s lack of improvisation skills. She explained that her husband would follow a routinized script if she insisted, but he was incapable of making the right decisions when left on his own.

As discussed earlier, practice theory looks at emotions, beliefs, and norms (*engagements*) to understand the purposive elements of practices. Research has shown that women’s *engagement* with child feeding practices is typically different than that of men in global north contexts. Women tend to associate food with care (Murcott, 1982) and feel more stressed by the tensions that arise between their own food needs and those of others (Cairns, Johnston, and Baumann 2010). Since women’s *engagement* with child feeding is connected to cultural expectations, men’s relative distance from responsabilizing discourses results in a more worry-free approach to their children’s eating (Harris et al., 2020). This gendered structure of *engagements* in feeding work has implications for established food routines, and with the transition to parenthood, the components that make up eating routines tend to shift accordingly. For instance, before having children, Clare and her partner shared the responsibility of cooking and shopping almost equally. Their tastes in food were also synchronized to a great extent after a long period of cohabitation. However, after having children, Clare began to take more and more responsibility for all components of foodwork, including the most non-domestic one: shopping. She explained why this was the case:

Yeah, and because I’m stricter about what the boys eat. [laughs] He didn’t really mind. Because I always want to get really good quality things, and sometimes organic. But, uhm, he would, he would be much happier just to buy without thinking about it.

During the go-along interviews that took place in supermarkets, Sarah was quite diligent in checking the labels of most packaged products. When probed about whether or not she had always been “concerned” about the ingredients of store-bought food products, Clare stated that having children triggered a noticeable change. This demonstrates how important it is to understand the interdependency of practices and the knock-on effects that transitions in adjacent practices have on established routines (Warde, 2016). As this case shows, the *engagement* component of feeding practices (e.g., norms and beliefs about women’s responsibility for healthy feeding) can trigger a change in the *understandings* (nourishing food), which then bring about a change in *procedures*. In most of the

families, the female participants in particular reflected on how they adopted new cooking skills in the process of weaning. More than half of the interviewees purchased steamer baskets or products of a similar sort when their children began trying solid foods. Although not explicitly calculated, these priorities have become integrated into the routine *procedures* the participants use to cook food for themselves. Practical issues ranging from cost to time constraints demand a smooth routinization of feeding and eating. Most women in our sample felt responsible for this orchestration due to the unique set of *engagements* associated with feeding. For instance, Maisie suggested that her partner lacked the insight and “mindset” she has about what their son can and cannot eat, which resulted in her accepting more and more responsibility for cooking. Steph explained why the division of labor in cooking changed after the transition to parenthood:

My husband, you know, like, he’ll, he’ll cook something great, and it will be nutritious and stuff but you know the first thing he would do is put a whole bunch of chili in. And I’ll be like, “Can Robin have any of this, then?” And he’ll be like, “Oh, no.” And it’s like, ugh, so we got all these leftovers, and he can’t have any of it. [laughs] And you know, that’s sort of, like it does, to be able to sort of have food for both of us, it does just take a bit of thinking about. And because I manage the food Robin has . . . I’m on the ball for it. he doesn’t really think about whether it’s potential baby food or not.

Steph was not alone in noticing how having children impacted the food-related division of labor. Ranging from shopping to cooking, all elements making up the compound practice of eating tended to go through a realignment of *understandings*, *procedures*, and *engagements*. In almost all households, this resulted in a retreat into normative behaviors, “falling back into gender,” confirming the broader literature looking at the transition to parenting (Miller, 2011). The final section of this paper will reflect on the significance of these findings for the sociology of food consumption and practice theory.

Conclusion

Drawing on longitudinal, ethnographic, and small-scale research, this study has sought to understand how transitioning to parenting shapes the foodwork in families. The sample had certain limitations. It did not include families at the extreme ends of the cultural and economic capital spectrum, as well as diverse family formations. However, the ethnographic and longitudinal design produced some nuanced findings, which contribute to the literature on consumption, food parenting, and practice theory in different ways.

The initial research inquiry focused on the transformations that occur in foodwork after the arrival of children. Studies looking at food consumption patterns often treat foodwork as an established practice, in which adults perform their habits and act on their preferences at any given time. However, certain life transitions change the conditions within which eating routines are enacted, breaking and remaking new habits. As this research shows, once feeding becomes a concern, almost all aspects of foodwork change, often creating a gap between the ideal and the day-to-day experiences. To utilize commensality as a tool for food socialization, it is essential to serve dishes that please all family members. This necessitates making changes to previously routinized and embodied methods and skills while balancing conflicting goals, such as expanding their

children's food preferences, fostering an appreciation for healthy choices, serving age-appropriate meals, and minimizing the risk of food refusal. Therefore, looking at the food consumed in a household with young children at a particular time may not accurately reflect the culinary tastes and food preferences of the parents. This is not to suggest that cross-sectional studies lack any insight, but rather to emphasize the need to provide context and nuance for the investigation of a consumption domain that undergoes tremendous change with the transition to parenting. These changes in *procedures* are also underpinned by a shift in *engagements*; with implications in terms of the gendered division of labor in the family. While most recent studies suggest an increase in men's involvement in foodwork among newly married couples (e.g., Bove and Sobal 2006), this study of families with young children has revealed a backwards trend. Food parenting studies have shown how food is central to the discourses and experiences of (good) mothering. The present study shows how these *engagements* are linked to other components of feeding practices (*understandings* and *procedures*), as well as how they reshape the foodwork that had been established between couples prior to having children.

The second research question aimed to explore the insights an in-depth examination of this stage could provide into the dynamics of eating habits and their theoretical interpretations. Practice theory provides a unique lens and associated conceptual tools to approach practices as interdependent phenomena. Research on child feeding and adult food consumption has generated separate insights into the social processes that underpin and structure habits. However, more attention needs to be paid to their routinization that lays the foundations of stability and change in family foodwork. As Warde (2016, 12) suggests, this has policy implications: "recommending changes to only some parts of eating while ignoring the others is a likely source of failure". For instance, part of the child feeding advice given by the NHS is to encourage children to eat the same foods as the rest of the family and sit down together at dinner time (UHCW NHS Trust, n.d.). However, as this research shows, implementing this advice is far from straightforward, necessitating changes in adults' own food tastes, habits, and emotional relationships with food. Similarly, addressing concerns of gender inequality in foodwork will require a closer inspection of how food-related activities are renegotiated when children's feeding is added to domestic culinary tasks. The findings also suggest that life transitions should not be solely regarded as discrete "moments" that are readily conducive to consciously planned "behavior" change. As argued by Burningham and Venn (2020), this process is fluid and experienced variably within the context of enacting relationships. Additionally, dominant perspectives on "behavior change" mistakenly view consumption practices primarily at the individual level, assuming that individuals are capable of actively managing their life transitions. However, the longitudinal design of this project revealed how aspirations, such as family meals and enhancing children's palates, are adjusted in the context of interdependent practices, such as a partner's work schedule and food refusals. Exploring the changes that occur in *understandings*, *procedures*, and *engagements* during transitions demonstrates how compound consumption activities are dynamic and relational achievements.

The third question explored how parents' social interactions and identities influence the routinization of eating and feeding. Practice theory does not focus on the individual practitioner as a unit of analysis; instead, it emphasizes the unfolding of appropriate conduct in everyday life. Shifting the focus from the individual to the practice itself has

been useful in highlighting the limitations of consumer autonomy and the inability to trigger desired behavioral changes (e.g., environmentalism) by targeting changes in actions and speech (Evans 2011). However, identities play a significant role in shaping practitioners' *understandings* and *engagements*. As this research shows, gender as a system of domination shapes practitioners' identities in distinct ways, resulting in different motivations for feeding practices among men and women. This, in turn, often leads to a reluctant renegotiation of the division of labor and is used to justify men's inflexibility and limited capacity to adapt when it comes to planning children's food. There are important emerging studies that view aspects of identity, such as gender, as part of the *understandings* that integrate the tacit and discursive elements of practices. In Welsh and Warde's discussion of understandings, gender is also defined as an "ideational element common to multiple practices" (2017, p. 184). Since practice theory has primarily been applied in the context of domestic consumption, technology, and sustainability research, gender, among other aspects of identity, has started to be conceptualized within this framework. The findings of this paper suggest that national identity also does thread through their practices in different ways, giving new meanings to the practice of eating with children. In this sense, this research support recent calls for considering identities in practice theoretical analysis and provide support for the proposition that the experiences of practitioners can enhance our understanding of how practices are reproduced and changed (Hargreaves, 2011).

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