



Empowered to cook: The crucial role of ‘food agency’ in making meals



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ABSTRACT

What makes an individual, on any given occasion, able and willing to prepare a meal for themselves: that is, to *cook*? As home cooking has increasingly become the focus of public-health, nutrition, and policy interventions and campaigns, the need for a better understanding has become apparent. It is clear that cooking is not merely a matter of mechanical skill or rote training; beyond this, it is difficult to explain why similar individuals have such different capacities for setting and achieving food-related goals. This paper proposes a new paradigm for cooking and food provisioning – termed “food agency” – that attempts to describe how an individual’s desires form and are enacted in correspondence with social environments: broadly, agency emerges from the complex interplay of individual technical skills and cognitive capacities with social and cultural supports and barriers. Drawing on a close reading of anthropological and sociological research into cooking, the authors propose that an individual’s ability to integrate such complexity in regard to provisioning – to *possess* ‘food agency’ – is crucial. This argument is supplemented by empirical case studies from a large body of ethnographic observations and interviews with home cooks from the United States, conducted over the last decade. Overall, more food agency means the cook is more *empowered to act*. Adopting the paradigm of food agency into the consideration of everyday cooking practices has the potential to support transdisciplinary food scholarship integrating individual actions within a food system and thus inform nutrition and public health interventions related to meal preparation.

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1. Introduction

How do we define contemporary American meal preparation – *cooking* – either as a set of discrete tasks or as social practice? Creating a meaningful definition that reflects what *happens* as well as what is *expected* is not a straightforward process: meal preparation is too complex a practice to be ‘contained’ using traditional assumptions. Defining what is involved in making a meal is now clearly more than a semantic problem; it requires navigating various assumptions about what makes meal preparation important and relevant. It also has practical applications: deciding what cooking *is* dictates our approaches and interventions into an array of perceived social, public-health, and even moral problems surrounding how and what we eat.

This paper considers American meal preparation from the perspective of the individual in terms of the actions required, the contexts of decision-making, and the self-perceptions of such

actions and decisions. In this we depart from a large body of research into food and eating: we are not directly concerned with *food consumption*, but with a more nuanced and complete understanding of all that goes into making a person able to *produce a meal, rather than consume a meal prepared (in some manner) by others*. Thus, while there is a clear connection that we will address between these acts and consumption behaviors, the latter are not the main focus of the current paper.

Here we present a conceptual argument for considering a “food agency” paradigm in cooking research: understanding how individuals set and achieve their goals – from provisioning to planning to preparing – within complex individual, cultural and social contexts. While the paper is primarily conceptual, we supplement the argumentation with empirical evidence from our research group’s decade-long research into home-cooking practice. Thus, this paper is *not* primarily empirical even though our argument emerges from a number of qualitative inquiries. We begin by presenting the argument that a new paradigm for the scholarly consideration of cooking is necessary; we advocate for a more *transdisciplinary* approach to defining, interpreting *and* intervening

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into a crucial and also crucially transformed everyday activity. We then turn to the existing scholarship. Here the focus is on qualitative, empirical inquiries (especially the work of anthropologists) and the increased importance of the connection between cooking and health that is informing much of the now increasingly robust research into what has been a relatively neglected aspect of daily life experience. We summarize the sources of our empirical data briefly, and then present a case study that exemplifies how an individual might demonstrate agency in their cooking practices. Building on the case study, we show how this particular case study fits within broader sociological and anthropological models of agency, and why agency is a necessary and sufficient concept for building a better approach to food preparation. To this end, we present several further short case studies that demonstrate particular aspects of agency in cooking practice. Finally, we conclude by summarizing our arguments and proposing new avenues of research – both theoretical and empirical – that a “food agency” approach supports.

2. What is cooking, and why does it matter?

Over the past decade, there has been a groundswell of interest in making meals at home, among scholars and practitioners alike. For example, a number of opinion pieces have been published calling attention to the problems and solutions to be found in closer examinations of American cooks. In a New York Times op-ed in September 2011, historian Helen Zoe Veit asserts that it is “time to revive home economics.” She points out that the home-economics movement sought to have everyday, home meal-preparation taken seriously and to study the importance of what happens in American homes to individuals, families and society at large. Veit bemoans the marginalization of the field, and says, “teaching cooking – real cooking – in public schools could help address a host of problems facing Americans today.” In another editorial in the *Journal of the American Medical Association*, nutrition researcher Liechtenstein and Ludwig (2010) make a similar call: home economics or domestic science needs to be reinvigorated because “parents and caregivers today cannot be expected or relied on to teach children how to prepare healthy meals. As is the case with these authors (see also Nelson, Corbin, & Nickols-Richardson, 2013; Pollan 2006, 2009, 2013; Bittman, 2014), in the contemporary American context, there is a tendency to see broad transformations in how, why, and where meals are made as indicating a decline of the *ability* and *capacity* to cook those meals. However, often forgotten is the fact that, when it comes to a necessary and everyday practice such as meal preparation, the issue might be more clearly framed as *acting* on such abilities and capacities.

The objective of our work is to focus on actions and decisions that lead from the idea of a meal to sitting down and eating it on any given occasion. To do so, we focus on the concept of ‘*food agency*’ describing the complexity of everyday food preparation in a fashion that is holistic, descriptive, and pragmatic. A trans-disciplinary conceptual framework, built in the intersection of theories and methods of anthropology, sociology, psychology and public health, we argue, allows best for *how to define and interpret what happens*. Such a framework will have the broadest impact, facilitating more accurate interpretations of *the consequences for individual and society*.

This framework illuminates the process of individual action within one’s food environment. In our own and others’ empirical observation and research, it is clear that some individuals are able to set and achieve goals related to food and cooking, while others struggle to do so. We propose that this difference is determined by an individual’s acquired capacity to actively employ a broad range of learned cognitive and technical actions related to meal

preparation. This capacity, which we call ‘*food agency*,’ considers how the actor (read: home cook) completing the work employs manual and cognitive skills as well as sensorial perceptions, while also navigating and shaping various societal structures (e.g., time, money, mobility, etc.) in the course of setting and meeting personal meal preparation goals. Thus, to have ‘*food agency*’ is to be *empowered to act* throughout the course of planning and preparing meals within a particular food environment. Such moves, from aspiration to action, are particularly important in the contemporary American context, where it is increasingly feasible to choose not to cook and still be fed.

In our approach, the crucial assumption is identifying cooking as a skilled practice in relation to social and cultural contexts and constraints, rather than simply a set of mechanical and individualized skills. This emphasis on the acts and action of meal preparation echoes other scholars’, especially work by anthropologists interested in the intersections between individual action and social environments: for example, anthropologist Francesca Merlan recently argued that, “agency is broadly taken to designate a capacity to act consequentially in circumstances” (Merlan, 2016, p. 16). Due to their *consequence*, the acts and actions related to cooking merit an examination that considers all that matters in making a meal, thus the full set of abilities and capacities within particular circumstances. First, following Tim Ingold (2011 [2001]) we argue that cooking is a skilled practice that cannot be understood when it is considered solely as an additive assembly of constituent parts – choosing whole wheat or white, chopping instead of dicing, and so on. Rather, cooking is the emergent and contingent result of repeated activity, material objects, and acting subject (Ingold, 2011 [2001]). In this usage, skill is ecumenical and democratic; a skillful act does not have to look a certain way. Second, any skilled practice is always mediated by the larger contexts in which it takes place. In our characterization, food agency occurs when an individual is able to *produce* what is *envisioned*. As a research group, we are interested in understanding what ‘*food agency*’ looks like as an *active* and *everyday* practice, negotiating between existing assumptions about how best to define and analyze meal preparation. Different skillful acts are explored, but we do not deem particular skills more worthy than others; our interests lie in the process as much or more than the outcome. We will provide context, review the relevant scholarly research regarding meal preparation, and present case studies of food agency in action.

3. Relating food agency and changing circumstances

Our conception of food agency emerged over time, as we accumulated evidence from our qualitative research with home cooks throughout the Northeastern United States. The research primarily involved interviews, observations and focus groups, with people from diverse areas (rural and urban), diverse backgrounds (socioeconomic status, race and ethnicity), and diverse ages (young adults to elderly). What became clear is that, for modern American cooks, there is always an option *not* to cook. The emergence and pervasiveness of the modern food industry in all corners of the United States has deeply complicated the apparently simple question of what is and is not home cooking. As more and more elements of the process of making a meal have been outsourced and industrialized, the intersection between environment, intention, and action has become more complicated. In fact, it is now possible to eat without knowing or even being able to imagine anyone involved in the production of a meal. This leads to a number of novel questions: for example, has cooking taken place if one opens a box of Kraft Mac and Cheese, stirring the cheese packet into the cooked pasta? Is microwaving frozen broccoli cooking? Does ‘*customizing*’ these processed foods – adding flavors or preparing

them in a manner that departs from the package directions – count as cooking? The answers to these questions are by no means uniform (Wolfson, 2015). What is consistent is the pervasive disjunction between production and consumption. The ability to keep these domains separate has numerous consequences for making and eating meals. The concept of food agency explains two contemporary realities for American home cooks: one, there is always an option not to cook and still be fed; and two, the efforts to successfully make a home cooked meal require more than mechanical skills but navigational ones too.

One of the most prominent shifts in American foodways in the past century has been less time spent actively cooking. (Bowers, 2000; Cutler, Glaeser, & Shapiro, 2003; Guthrie, Lin, & Frazao, 2002; Jabs & Devine, 2006; Smith, Ng, & Popkin, 2013; Zick & Stevens, 2010). It is important to note, of course, that this shift can be understood to primarily concern *time spent* in the acts of meal preparation. Many meals still consumed in a domestic setting were not made on site. Time-use studies have shown that Americans now spend about 15% of the time they spent in the 1920s on kitchen work (American Time Use Survey 2013; Bryant, 1996). This decline has been particularly precipitous since the late 1960s, when Americans still spent almost 2 h per day in the kitchen (Smith et al., 2013; Zick & Stevens, 2010) with most recent research at approximately 30 min per day, indicating that changes in cooking are likely related to the general structural changes in American society.

As time spent on home-meal preparation has decreased, the amount of food eaten outside the home (e.g., at restaurants, cafeterias, cafés, fast food joints, convenience locations, etc.) has increased. In 1929, 85% of Americans' total food purchases were allocated for home preparation and consumption with the remaining 15% reserved for foods eaten outside the home (USDA ERS 2014). According to the latest record, in 2012, Americans are now spending just 53.5% of their total food budget on foods eaten at home and a historical high of 46.5% on foods eaten outside of the home (USDA ERS 2014). Collectively, the literature on U.S. food-preparation trends frames the transition away from home-meal preparation as the convergent result of a number of significant societal shifts, most notably: women joining the workforce (Bowers, 2000; Guthrie et al., 2002); a revolution in mass food preparation (Cutler et al., 2003); and the increased length of an American workday (Schor, 1991). All these social transformations can easily lead to a perception of decline in skill. However, do we really know what happens when people make meals at home? (For a similarly framed, classic inquiry into the apparent demise of the “family” meal, see Murcott, 1997). And, since in our interactions with informants the spectre of being able to choose *not* to cook loomed large, how can we clearly describe what tips the balance to make individuals feel empowered to cook, to move from idea to action – to decide *not* to order pizza to be delivered or to buy frozen pizza at the corner store?

4. Scholarship on cooking and meal preparation

Among social scientists, there has historically been greater attention paid to American patterns of meal consumption than to meal preparation. Even among anthropologists, where the topic of food has possibly the longest scholarly genealogy – since it is, among other things, ‘... a prism that absorbs and reflects a host of cultural phenomena’ (Counihan, 1999, p. 6) – the cooking itself has attracted far less scholarship (Sutton, 2013; Trubek, 2012, 2017). Much of recent scholarship has focused on what cooking can tell us about myriad important topics – to name a few: gender, history, tradition, nutrition policy. For example, in Warren Belasco's excellent overview of the key concepts in the emerging field of food studies, the discussion of cooking is confined to issues of gender

identity and obligations to foodwork (2008). However, ‘to conclude that cooking provides only a good ‘window’ onto other topics of importance would miss [a] central point’ (Sutton, 2014, p. 182): *cooking itself matters*.

As Sutton notes, ‘[i]n the field of anthropology, where everyday life has long been part of the ethnographic project, cooking surprisingly was long only given glancing mention’ (Sutton, 2014, p. 134). Sutton chalks up the incidental presence of cooking in ethnographies to the fact that such domestic practices, near-universally performed by females, have historically been viewed as ‘relatively uninteresting anthropologically speaking’ (Sutton, 2014).

However, he cites three recent anthropological works that bring cooking to the fore (see: Counihan, 2009; Kaufmann, 2010; Wrangham, 2009). In his own ethnographic research, Sutton (2014) uses participant-observation paired with video footage of a broad range of cooking practices at his research site – the Greek island of Kalymnos. His focus moves from the general (e.g., theories of skill and knowledge transmission, the gendered and generational propriety of cooking practice, discussion of recipes and cooking shows) to the specific (e.g., cutting ingredients in the hand and other kitchen ‘micropractices,’ the kitchen choreography of mother and daughter, instances of continuity and change in familial practice) in order to explain what makes Kalymnians competent cooks. He concludes that cooking – and food – ‘are not abstractable and quantifiable but rather embedded in a particular social and technical environment’ (Sutton, 2014, p. 190). The complexity of such actions, in any milieu, reveal the need to investigate in such a way that what happens in any given home is seen as *emergent* (always in flux) and *contingent* (always involving external realities).

Frances Short (2006) adopted an ‘anthropological’ approach that treated cooks as skilled informants, able to articulate and demonstrate practices worth understanding (instead of merely reforming or optimizing such practices). She combined semi-structured interviews with more focused observational inquiry (thus setting the stage for the more precise analysis made available with the cooking videos used by Sutton (2014)). Short rejects the widespread notion that cooking is simple and straightforward, or ‘an uncomplicated and largely technical activity’ (Sutton, 2014, p. 52). Short calls for cooking to be conceptualized as person-centered, rather than task-centered; again, cooking *emerges*, rather than existing *a priori*. Such an approach suggests that the context-dependent integration of skills and strategies is required to get the job done. For cooking to happen, Short argues, a combination of mechanical abilities and textbook knowledge must be integrated with the perceptual and conceptual skills needed to plan, organize, and monitor the progress of one's cooking (Sutton, 2014), a theory of cooking that parallels anthropological theories of learning (Lave, 1988) and skill (Ingold, 2011 [2001]). Short emphasizes that making a meal is a *process* necessitating engagements extending far beyond the home kitchen. While previous works have pared the act of meal preparation down into its various stages – planning, provisioning, preparing, plating, and packing up the leftovers (for examples, see Bell & Marshall, 2003; Crowther, 2013; Sobal & Bisogni, 2009) – Short argues that cooking must be understood through the interrelations of these stages – and of these stages with the cooks. Meal preparation requires a complex matrix of action and cognition.

This approach prefigures an emerging vision of cooking as a skilled practice, thus envisioning cooks as craftworkers – in direct contrast to an often unchallenged assumption that cooking is a rote process. In her study of home and street cooks in Mexico City, Joy Adapon (2008) presents one of the first elaborations of this position. Adapon argues that the skilled, creative practice of cooking creates agency for its practitioners – in particular women, who in Mexico City might be otherwise circumscribed by the gendered

social structure (Adapon, 2008, pp. 71–88). Her cook-informants – a mix of ‘amateur’, semi-professional, and professional cooks – describe their cooking as the ability ‘to draw upon a ‘stock of knowledge’ that is stored in their heads, hearts, hands, noses and mouths, [r]ather than strictly following a recipe’ (Adapon, 2008, p. 14). Cooking is not only a complex, embodied, contextual process, but because of its nature as a social practice creates outcomes beyond the mere incidence of a finished meal.

5. Connecting health and cooking

Effective cooking requires myriad actions, and increasingly, these actions are inextricably tied to American perceptions of health and healthy behaviors. It could be argued that the recent multi-disciplinary engagement with home meal preparation stems from theories of cause (making dinner at home from scratch) and effect (healthier American bodies). The relationship between the perceived decline of cooking and the perceived decline in individual health (e.g., obesity, heart disease, diabetes, etc) has become a main focus of research into meal preparation. As the authors of one study frame it: ‘A lack of competency in food preparation is a primary barrier in making more healthful food choices’ (Beets, Swanger, Wilcox, & Cardinal, 2007, p. 288). There is a considerable body of scholarship suggesting individuals who lack the knowledge, skills, and/or motivation to prepare home-cooked meals often fall short of the recommended guidelines for fruit and vegetable consumption (e.g., Brown & Hermann, 2005; Crawford, Ball, Mishra, Salmon, & Timperio, 2007; Hughes, Bennett, & Hetherington, 2004; Larson, Nelson, Neumark-Sztainer, Story, & Hannan, 2009; Larson, Perry, Story, & Neumark-Sztainer, 2006). One explanation for this relationship is structural: non-cooks are also often made to rely on pre-prepared food sources, which are generally much higher in unhealthy additives such as saturated fats, processed sugars, and sodium (Condrasky & Hegler, 2010; Lang & Caraher, 2001; Soliah, Walter, & Jones, 2012). Along these lines, many researchers have found that individuals who cook regularly are able to retain greater autonomy over the amount and variety of foods they eat, an important tactic for maintaining a healthy diet (Bisogni, Jastran, Seligson, & Thompson, 2012; Simmons & Chapman, 2012).¹ This concept is echoed in our own qualitative data, in which participants expressed that they felt more in control of their diet and their health when they had the skill, kitchen space, and groceries necessary to prepare their own food (see below).

The combined effect of lower intakes of healthful, and higher intakes of unhealthy ingredients by individuals who cook infrequently has elicited concern within the public health community. This concern has led to attempts to directly connect increased cooking skill to positive health outcomes. Swiss researchers Hartmann, Dohle, and Siegrist (2013) developed a cooking skill survey, which was administered to a large and representative sample of the Swiss population. Notably, the researchers found that individuals with cooking skills reported eating more vegetables and lower amounts of convenience foods, even when the results were controlled for individuals’ health consciousness (Hartmann et al., 2013). Brown and Hermann (2005) reported similar findings in a study of educational cooking classes for youth and adults, in which cooking classes (and presumably increased cooking competence) resulted in increased fruit and vegetable intakes amongst their participants. The same was found for adolescents who are involved

in family meal preparation (Larson et al., 2006). In a relatively recent review of the literature compiled by Fruh, Fulkerson, Mulekar, Kendrick, and Clanton (2011), family meals (which imply but do not guarantee ‘cooking’; see Wolfson, 2015) were linked to healthier food choices, more consistent meal patterns, and to a wide range of psychosocial, non-dietary health benefits.

6. Empirical studies and the construction of food agency

Qualitative observational inquiries into people’s everyday approaches to planning, provisioning and preparing meals reveals the complexity of action *and* intent involved in moving from an idea to a result. Intervention studies indicate differential consequences for individual and public health when people consistently make such meals. So, how can *food agency* help create a better understanding and integration of actions and consequences? Our research is organized to capture the dynamic interplay between individual, skill, and context. We look at each component individually and in concert, seeking to see the emergence or suppression of food agency in the empirical realities of everyday Americans, to work through all those small decisions and compromises that make or break the ability of an individual to be empowered to act on any given day. In order to do such empirical work, we have used qualitative research methods in a number of different settings. We have addressed two main research themes: first, how to capture people learning to cook in order to figure out just how someone might obtain a type of agency in the process; second, how to talk to people about everyday meal preparation practices and learn what helps them and what gets in the way. For the current paper we draw examples from a large set of mixed-methods research projects conducted over the last decade. These projects have included ethnographic interviewing and videography, surveys, and participant observation.

The dataset from which Sylvia’s example (below) is drawn came from research conducted between 2005 and 2010 in parts of the Northeast United States (rural, semi-urban and urban locales), and investigated home-cooking behaviors of individuals at different phases of life and in different economic and social circumstances (datasets are reported in detail in Epter, 2009; Henley, 2010; Nathanson, 2008). At the conclusion of the research, 30 home cooks had participated, generating 30 open-ended interviews and over 50 h of ethnographic video footage of home meal preparation activities. Every person was a unique cook, characterized in the kitchen by distinctive habits. This diversity of practice was partly due to our research design, which sought cooks of differing abilities, but partly due to the diverse possibilities of preparing a meal.

In another set of studies (Carabello, 2015; Morgan, 2016), we held focus groups with community members in Vermont in order to explore what helps and hurts in everyday meal preparation, speaking to participants throughout the life course, from young, single people to middle-aged parents to older adults. Over twenty people (mostly women but some men) participated in the focus groups; the group participants’ ages ranged from 18 to 60, and they resided in rural and urban locales and came from a wide range of socioeconomic backgrounds.

We have also studied people learning to cook in a structured course on university campuses (Morgan, 2016), where young adults are in the process of leaving a home and becoming responsible for their own food provision. In one study, we followed eight undergraduate students (a subset of the class) taking a course called Food and Culture at the University of Vermont with a weekly ‘foods lab’ teaching both about meal preparation and key cultural concepts. These students were observed, interviewed, and videotaped while cooking in the lab setting. In a second iteration, we followed eight adult community members and eight undergraduate students

¹ It is worth mentioning here Angela Meah’s (and collaborators’) work in challenging normative discourses about declines in cooking skill from a supposed golden age (see for examples Meah & Watson, 2011; Meah & Jackson, 2013).

taking a “side by side”, 10-week course on healthy meal preparation in urban Philadelphia. These community members and undergraduate students were observed and interviewed both during the course and two months after the course was completed. From this mixed group of Drexel University students and community residents from the neighborhood of Mantua, the community members represented a range of ages and socioeconomic status, although most participants were people of color and many came from low-income backgrounds.

In all our efforts, we made it a priority to witness the emergence of skill, to try to connect it to food agency, and to investigate various contexts within which people might utilize these skills. The qualitative research, *in toto*, created the empirical evidence leading to ‘food agency’ as an effective transdisciplinary framework to facilitate accurate definitions of and robust interventions into modern American home meal preparation. At the same time, this body of research has led to a number of other scholarly engagements, including the submission (and future submission) of multiple journal articles [Carabello and Trubek (in press); Lahne, Wolfson, & Trubek (Unpublished results); Trubek and Carabello (in review); Wolfson et al. (2017)].

7. Case study: who is a home cook with a high level of food agency?

Sylvia was among the cooks in our first studies. Sylvia spent time in the United States as an exchange student in her teenage and college years and finally emigrated in her twenties. In Russia, her mother did all the cooking, even when Sylvia lived at home while attending university. Her active interest in cooking emerged when she wanted to recreate the meals of her childhood.

I was missing my ethnic food, Russian meals, and I tried to make it, and I also tried to expose my family, my American family to what it is like. What the food, what the meals are like in Russia. I made, Russian beet salad, which is potatoes, onions, carrots, pickles, and beets and its all with vegetable oil or sunflower oil.

She goes on to say that she made these meals without a recipe, “For those meals, I just knew it somehow. When you see it, you know the right proportions.” When Sylvia begins to make dinner, she quickly consults a Russian cookbook. She then moves into the kitchen and starts to cook. Her first actions are organizational. She pulls out all the ingredients necessary for a Russian tomato and cucumber salad that was a childhood staple. In Russia, she explains, we didn’t have access to lots of vegetables, and this salad uses those that were available: cucumber, tomatoes, and green onions and dill. “And we would add sunflower oil and sour cream. We did not have prepared dressings.” All the ingredients are lined up on the back of the counter, and she then reaches for two bowls, a cutting board and a paring knife. There is no hesitancy in her moves. She grips the cucumber in one hand. She holds the knife in her other hand and slices the cucumber into smaller pieces by moving the knife through the cucumber and towards her body. Slice by slice, the whole cucumber gets smaller and the pieces fall into the bowl directly below (David Sutton discusses a similar technique used by women on the Greek island of Kalymnos). The tomato is cut much the same way. She seasons with kosher salt and a dollop of sour cream, stirs thoroughly and then refrigerates the salad. There is no hesitancy of thought or motion.

We would say that Sylvia possesses food agency: she easily demonstrates an ability to make a meal without much fuss. She has a clear idea of what she wants to make and the technical and navigational skills to complete the task. An émigré from Russia, she displays a comfort with the practice of cooking that emerges from

internalizing a system of action. Her actions are consequential in their efficiency. For example, she keeps the main counter where she works very organized. The ingredients for the dish are pushed to the back of the counter, each one clearly separated for easier handling. She does not include more on her cutting board than what she will be directly working with; the majority of the board stays clean, free of extra tools, ingredients, etcetera. Her actions are also consequential in their ability to translate her intentions into results. She knows, both in mind and body, how to move from intention to action in regards to food preparation. This capacity is food agency.

Is it simply ironic that a recent émigré serves as our ‘ideal type?’ Sylvia brings her cultural knowledge to bear when she makes a meal in her new home in the United States. The ways in which Sylvia talks about acquiring food agency – from familial and cultural exposure and repetition – are increasingly uncommon in her new home. Thus, although there were other strong home cooks in the course of our studies, in their reflections the many choices available to them, at many junctures, were articulated as interfering with the process of intent to action. Their circumstances impinged more on their food agency.

8. Action to agency: extant scholarship

In order to effectively make meals, people need to feel empowered to act. Our focus on more than mechanical skills – meal preparation involves a set of complex *acts* within certain contexts and thus meal preparation requires *agency* – is informed by sociological, anthropological, and psychological theories of ‘agency’ (Bandura, 2006; Bourdieu, 1977; Giddens, 1979; Hitlin & Elder, 2007; Merlan, 2016; Ortner, 2001; Sewell, 1992). Michel de Certeau’s (and collaborators’) seminal work, the two volume *The Practice of Everyday Life* (De Certeau, 1984; De Certeau, Giard, & Mayol, 1998), located agency at the *intersection* of individual, society and a particular immediate environment (neighborhood, home). Primarily he investigated the emergence of a consumer society in France; however, in this research, de Certeau and his co-investigators (Luce Giard and Pierre Mayol) were not interested in building grand theory as much as developing “some ways of thinking about everyday practices of consumers, supposing from the start they are of a tactical nature (1998: xxiii). Following people, as they walked their neighborhoods, interacted with their families, and figured how to shop and make meals, they identified two key concepts as crucial to understanding the dynamic interdependence of individual, environment and society: “[the] intrinsic relation to *opportunity and circumstance*” (1998: xxviii). The ethnographic analyses by Sutton (2014) and Short (2006) – combined with our own qualitative inquiries – echo the centrality of such *emergent processes* involved in the shift from aspiration to action. Home meal preparation, closely considered, is a mediation between internal desires and external realities; an acknowledgement of such dynamics are necessary if we are to understand as well as attempt to enhance food agency.

As Laura Ahearn points out in an Annual Review of Anthropology article on language and agency, “In most scholarly endeavors, defining terms is half the battle” (Ahearn 2001: 110). We agree with Ahearn’s broad definition: “Agency refers to the socioculturally mediated capacity to act” (Ahearn 2001). This definition, one that simultaneously acknowledges the individual and his/her context, allows for an interpretation of agency as a *dynamic* interaction. The definition allows for, in anthropologist Sherry Ortner’s phrase, an “agency of intention” as much as an “agency of power” (2003: 111): the actor always has the *potential* for action even if, in some instances, there are impediments to such action.

Ortner’s call for an ‘agency of intention’ is echoed in Albert

Bandura's (1982) psychological theory grounded in an individual's self-efficacy (2006). Bandura (1982; 1989) regards self-efficacy as the crucial bridge between an agent's knowledge and her action, the difference between capability and actualization. Thus, in his theory, the essence of agency rests on the cognitive processes individuals employ to navigate their environments, situating the agent as both a producer and product of social systems (Bandura, 2001). He claims that '[s]ocial structures are created by human activity, and sociostructural practices, in turn, impose constraints and provide resources and opportunities for personal development and functioning' (Bandura 2001: 15). Put differently, a lack of economic resources or social supports may impede desired actions and behaviors but the cognitive processes that underlie agentic actions are shaped but not erased by encounters with social structures and cultural values.

Certainly, the 'agency of power' also articulated by Ortner plays a crucial role in why some individuals are consistently more empowered to act, to make meals each and every day rather than to choose to have others do that work. Here, the complexities of the 'sociocultural mediations' intrinsic to most definitions of agency need to be addressed when understanding the move from aspiration to action. First, the route to empowerment, to choosing to make the dumplings by hand instead of buying them premade, is enabled by a cook's *skillful* negotiations in the context of food environments as replete with food already prepared (in some way) versus the individual components of a dish or meal. The ubiquitous industrial modes of production *deskills* the entire process and creates barriers to both possessing and utilizing skill: in food preparation, the history of the food industry has largely been a history of exchanging skill on the part of the home cook for technological innovation and sophistication in pre-consumer processing (Carroll, 2013; Shapiro, 2004). Second, the emergence or suppression of food agency also intersects with larger structures of power (see Bourdieu, 1977; Foucault, 1977). Race, class and gender are significant to everyday actions as well as the perceived meanings of such actions (Hitlin & Elder, 2007). Thus, it is the proficient practice of the individual, embedded in context, negotiating particular risks and constraints to achieve a particular result, not always consistent. In the case of meal preparation, such actions are not haphazard or rote, but are repeated socially mediated practices; learned, repeated, and executed in context. Once the universality of the necessity of intention and skillful practice is acknowledged as central to any definition of cooking, then the implications of social structures and cultural values to who does everyday home meal preparation and what happens in the long chain from aspiration to action can be better understood.

Francesca Merlan broadly defines agency as "a generative capacity, a lived relation between conditions and forms of human action" (2016: 1). The capacity to act consequentially: how might that be understood when looking at the generative interrelationship between cooking and food agency? The sites of enactment seem crucial – the bodily practices of the cook, the physical environments where shopping and cooking take place, the people who share in the final result. Also important is the assumption that these enactments are *not* random, but structured and habitual in some shape or form. Understanding cooking, then, requires an articulated and specific theory of action in relation to skilled practices – how knowledge gets transformed into practice, with consistency. Ingold argues that skilled practice cannot be understood in the disassembly of component parts. It is the 'gestural synergy of human being, tool and raw material,' engaged in actions guided by 'care, judgment, and dexterity' (2011 [2001]:352, also cf. Pye, 1968), and mediated by 'sensory corrections' (Pye, 1968; also cf.; Bernstein, 1996) that constitute skilled practice.

Thus, in our research, the cooks were seen to not only be

following a set script for obtaining nutrients; their meal preparations were understood to be a set of practices around food resulting in both personal and social ends related to food. Our qualitative research bears out that feelings of agency are not necessarily consistent and constant and can shift with changed circumstances. Geena, a middle-aged African American woman living in Philadelphia, possesses abundant interest and experience in cooking, but due to environment, is not empowered to act on her intentions around food. She lives in a house with a leaking roof and no electricity, and thus no working kitchen facilities. When asked, she rates her own agency as zero, explaining that she has to hand off that agency to another party—in her case, Whole Foods, where she can afford to eat one meal a day at the cold bar, what she sees as her most healthful option. If she could still provision and store food as her ancestors did, she believes she would be much less vulnerable to personal economic shocks. "When women gave up their pantry," Geena says, "they gave up their power."

9. Case study: learning food agency

In all of our qualitative studies of cooking practice, the emergent, shared themes reveal a complex tension between aspiration and action when it comes to everyday meal preparation, despite socioeconomic conditions and cultural contexts that are widely variable. For all the participants, the extent of everyday practice was predicated on what we have termed 'food agency', or the ability to take effective actions in regards to meal preparation. Cooking skill and its development were articulated by our subjects as a key linkage between their desired goals and what they could actually accomplish in the world; even across diverse economic, cultural, and material situations, our subjects tended to express an appreciation for the cultivation of food agency through the development of a diverse array of skills – cognitive, technical, and mechanical.

The experience of one college senior, Rachael, shows how gaining skill and confidence in her weekly cooking labs helped her break through barriers she faced in making meals at home. At the start of the semester, Rachael's commitments as a student and athlete often left her with little time or motivation to prepare meals more than once a week. As a compromise between looking out for her health and her budget, she stocked her home fridge with pre-prepared salads from the local co-op, along with accessible snacks like carrot sticks, hummus, cereal, and milk. As she admitted, "I really have no time at all, so food right now is just about getting it in when you can, and being okay with what you get that way." As the semester progressed, the confidence and skill Rachael gained through her weekly cooking labs began to change the way she approached preparing meals at home, despite the increasing demands of her schedule. In a follow-up interview she described the arc of her transformation: "I read this thing that said it takes six weeks to create a new neuropathway in our brains. I think it took me about six weeks to change anything in this lab ... And then, like about six weeks into it, you know, like at the halfway point, I was like, 'this could be really fun, I could really maybe start doing this at home', and then I did."

Compare Rachael to Evangeline, daughter of a Caribbean immigrant and a student at Drexel University in Philadelphia. At the beginning of the cooking class, Evangeline expressed the need to cook for herself; as she put it, "I'm living on my own and need to feed myself. If I don't, no one else is gonna do it for me." Despite this need, she was limited by her minimal cooking skills, and unlike Rachael, did not have the means to purchase much prepared food. Instead, she survived on no breakfast, take-out lunch, and her 'bare minimum' dinner repertoire of macaroni and cheese, rice, chicken, and pasta. In a follow-up focus group, several months after the class

ended, Evangeline enthusiastically reported that she was cooking far more than she had been, and cooking a greater range of foods. She had stopped eating fast food, stopped purchasing university “dining dollars,” and lost the 20 pounds she gained as a freshman. She began cooking more for her roommates. Although she admits that money still constrains her food choices, her first wish is to change “the skill level I have.”

10. Case study: enacting food agency

The experience of Paula, a middle-aged mother, demonstrates how food agency can allow home cooks to maintain consistency in meal preparation in the face of changing circumstances; a daily negotiation between ideals and reality. “Sometimes the meal planning is very different because ... it’s about who’s going to be where, who’s coming home, and who needs to go to what practice or gets picked up or has a board meeting, or who has this. So our goal is to eat as much as a family as possible, and so in order to achieve that goal of eating as a family—they’re homemade and very good meals—but, we’ll have burrito night on soccer night and cross country meet night, then we’ll do some other kind of crock pot wonder or something easy so we can eat at the same time. But, the planning piece: in theory, it starts beautiful, it’s this wonderful thing, all this feedback comes in and then the week goes on and it falls apart.” Adaptability and flexibility in the face of a changing reality are examples of “skills” that we have highlighted as distinct from the typical skills associated with culinary education.

Adaptability and flexibility are intrinsic to any consideration of cooking as a skilled practice. Sometimes the same person can actualize more or less of their skill. Sometimes different people work toward the same consequence, with varying results. Similar situations are easily navigated by some people, while they can become problematic or even detrimental for others (who we would argue exhibit more limited agency in regard to food). Dana, a woman in her sixties living in rural Vermont is not always able to actualize her skill. In one video, she is caramelizing onions for a pork stir-fry. Her cooking vessel is already amply heated as she had used it moments prior to brown the pork and mushrooms, since reserved and set aside. In fact, it may have even been too hot, as she recognizes the onions beginning to singe quite quickly after she tosses them in. Dana is aware that these are particular results given a seemingly trivial decision as to the heat of the pan. However, these ideals are not met due to certain distractions: just prior to this segment she admits that she should have begun sautéing the onions earlier in the cooking process, but was feeling a bit frazzled that day due to stresses from her job and so took a shortcut that didn’t work out as she hoped.

Problems arise in every kitchen; what differentiates a cook is her capacity to negotiate emerging issues. Even Ross, who runs the food service at a rural grade school, might run into trouble when cooking at home. While preparing dinner for his family, Ross uses tongs to coat some chicken breasts in a bowl of marinade and then swiftly transfers them to a large All-Clad skillet where it is met with a loud sizzle, audible even over the ventilation fan. It was Ross’ original plan to grill the marinated chicken, but after multiple attempts to light his grill he decided the gas tank must have been lower than he thought, and with little contemplation he moved inside to sauté them in a pan. Skillful practices help make the transition from intention to action, and skills, like improvisation, that we normally ignore or dismiss connect the more obvious culinary ones – like the actual chopping or sauteing: while Dana struggles to adapt to a problematic circumstance, Ross smoothly corrects and moves on from an initial setback.

In Ross’s case, skill allows him to overcome the momentary barrier of inadequate heat, but the ability to adapt successfully can

depend on context; whether the barriers in question are under a person’s control. Annie, a Filipina-American from Philadelphia, regularly prepares her desired daily menu of fish and vegetables. Despite her limited income, she feels no impingement on her food agency, because she now has access to a community garden plot where she grows nearly all the produce she eats. Before the garden was established, Annie ate similarly, but spent her entire Sunday traveling to buy cheaper vegetables and preparing them for the week. Her mutable practice allows her to feed herself, but the particular circumstances of her life either support that adaptability or put excess strain on it in terms of time and energy required for the same act.

11. Conclusion

In this paper we have presented a synthesis of extant scholarly investigations into cooking. We sought to integrate the concerns of the disciplines of anthropology, sociology, psychology, and public health while also revealing disciplinary assumptions that might interfere in an adequate analysis of cooking – from provisioning to planning to preparing an everyday meal. We have provided illustrative case studies from our qualitative research with home cooks; we pay close attention to capacities, abilities, and actions in order to understand what people do with food in everyday environments. In sum, we argue that to be a cook is to be *active*, with long-term, evolving goals achieved in the repeated and purposive application of action on the world (Bandura, 2006; Hitlin & Elder, 2007). Acknowledging the ability to act with consequence, integrated with an understanding of cooking as a skillful practice, seems crucial in the contemporary American context, when it is easy, even easiest, to remain a passive consumer. As Geena points out, there are numerous costs when aspirations are not translated into actions, and others do this work. Or as Evangeline shares, if you have never learned a skillful practice, it is difficult to realize even the best of intentions.

When working across scholarly domains, moving beyond the overall tendency to valorize the product (a meal to be consumed) over the process (the decisions and tasks), requires a trans-disciplinary approach. The food-agency paradigm presented in this paper does so and foregrounds the connection between cooking and a broader agentic orientation towards food preparation and provisioning. New conceptual insights are gained and innovative practical applications can be attempted. Home cooking is currently a topic of great public and scholarly interest: non-profits, government agencies, and researchers are developing and deploying programs and interventions to study and foster cooking. These programs, however, are not based on a coherent theory or paradigm for why cooking is such a panacea (Wolfson et al., 2017). For example, traditional, didactic culinary classes that teach embodied skills might (and usually do) increase agency, but so do experiential classes that also teach about other aspects of food and provisioning. Increasing food access and providing adequate food-preparation spaces are examples of barrier-reducing strategies to increase cooking, but these interventions addressing structural equalities do not necessarily *increase* food agency, and so without additional investment in fostering individuals’ capacities to act on these positive changes they may not have the desired effect. The reverse can be easily seen in some of our examples, where food agency seems to ameliorate the negative effect of structural barriers on cooking.

In summary, we posit that food agency is an individual’s relative capacity to intentionally produce the food that she envisions. Food agency is ecumenical and democratic; embodied and self-referential; dependent on a complex matrix of cognitive, technical, and mechanical skills; dynamic and in flux; mediated by the

larger contexts in which it takes place; and important because its results have material and social consequences. This is because agency related to food – being *able to act* throughout the planning and preparing of meals within a particular food environment – might relate to an individual's health and happiness in the context of food.

There is much more work to be done. We are interested in seeing the emergence of a sustained scholarship of food bridging culinary arts, public health, and the insights of psychology, sociology, and anthropology that attempts to investigate how the dialogue between technical and navigational skills and social environments – supporting and constraining – leads to differential outcomes for people and groups. Our most recent efforts including creating a validated scale for measuring food agency (Lahne et al., *Unpublished results*) and finalizing a culinary pedagogy based on the principles of food agency (see Morgan, 2016; Trubek & Carabello, *In press*). We are particularly interested, as are many researchers working both today and historically in food, in finding ways in which interventions into this dialogue can improve everyday food-lives. We believe that the framework centered on food agency and skillful practice that we have presented is a new and promising approach to helping people be empowered to act. Cooking has only just begun to be seen as a valuable and purposive practice, an embodied skill embedded in place and time, supporting personal and collective agency. What future meals can we help make, with such an understanding in mind?

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