Domestic cooking skills - what are they?

Frances Short

Abstract

Debate about the state of contemporary domestic cooking skills has intensified in recent years. World-wide, pre-prepared foods and modern technologies are seen as having brought about changes to people's abilities to cook. Some experts argue that domestic cooking skills are in decline, others that they are undergoing a transition.

Empirically gathered knowledge about domestic cooking however, is scant and lacks theoretical perspective. The concept of 'cooking skills' is rarely defined and usually interpreted as a straightforward set of practical techniques or tasks. As a result, debate has tended to remain speculative and difficult to develop.

This paper draws on the findings of a qualitative study of thirty cooks, living in England. It aimed to provide a systematically researched 'way of thinking' about domestic cooking, including cooking skills. The fieldwork for the study took place between 1997 and 1999. The findings of the study revealed that useful insight into people's cooking practices and approaches came from interpreting cooking skills as complex (consisting of mechanical, perceptual, conceptual, academic and planning skills) and 'person-centred'. This interpretation throws new light on current debate by showing, for example, how 'cooking skills' can be seen as specifically domestic and that, rather than be viewed as in decline, domestic cooking skills can be seen as constant and unchanging. It also provides additional insight into another finding of the study - that, when domestic cooking is examined closely and from the perspective of the cooks' cooking abilities and knowledge, it is difficult to see 'cooking from scratch' and 'cooking with pre-prepared foods' as two clearly discernible concepts and practices.

Background to the study
Concerns about domestic cooking and cooking skills

In recent years academics and specialists from all over the world have become concerned about the state of domestic cooking and cooking skills (Baderoon, 2002; Bonzo, Kitson & Wardrop, 2000; Foodshare, 2002; Lang et al., 1999; Perinau, 2002; Rodrigues & de Almeida, 1996; Zubiada & Tapper, 2001). Many have argued that it is being routinised, deskilled and devalued by the ready availability of industrially prepared 'convenience' foods (Mintz, 1985 and 1996; Ripe, 1993; Ritzer, 1996). Others suggest that there is an ongoing revision of domestic cooking practices and skills as 'cooking' increasingly becomes a recreational pastime in addition to a necessary daily task (Lang & Caraher, 2001).

The ready availability of factory-prepared foods is sometimes regarded as part of a positive restructuring of domestic food practices. Pre-prepared and ready-prepared foods are perceived as introducing variety to monotonous diets and encouraging people to be less reliant on skilled 'cooks' (Mennell, 1996). They have also been said to give women a greater choice over the quantity of food preparation that they do (Davies, 1998; Ridgewell, 1996). (Studies in the United Kingdom have shown women to be chiefly responsible for family food provision [Caplan et al., 1998; Murcott, 2000].) More common are opposing claims that through the use of pre-prepared and ready-prepared foods, cooking is routinised and deskilled and the choice to cook with raw foods is removed (Gofton, 1992; Stitt et al., 1996). Further, it is argued that routinisation and

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deskilling are exacerbated by the lack of opportunity for children to acquire cooking skills from parents and guardians who use pre-prepared foods (Lang & Baker, 1993; Leith, 1998; Street, 1994.)

Debate about the decline of domestic cooking skills is sometimes focused on the disappearance of the skills themselves. Concern is associated with the self-identification and self-value that, it is argued, come from having useful and necessary cooking skills (Gofton, 1995). More often however, concern lies with 'cooking skills as a means to an end'. It is argued that a decline of cooking skills can be connected with a commensurate decline in life-enhancement, family relationships and social processes (Longfield, 1996; Mintz, 1996; Shore, 2002), the role (whether subjugated or emancipated) of women as food providers (Dixey, 1996) and an ability to follow dietary guidelines and control diet (Department of Health [UK], 1996; Leather, 1996). A decline in cooking skills is also a key reason for the ever-increasing power of food industries and retailers say Stitt et al. (1996) and Ritzer (1996). In England and Wales these concerns were heightened when a schools' National Curriculum was introduced. 'Cookery' is now usually taught as part of Design and Technology rather than Home Economics and is generally considered to be less practically and domestically based (Lang et al., 1999; Royal Society of Arts, 1999; Stitt, 1996).

Theoretical perspectives
Problems in finding a theoretical perspective
Finding knowledge about domestic cooking to inform the study was neither simple nor straightforward. Symons has suggested that his historical study of cooks and cooking [1998] is probably the first book *about* cooks rather than *for* cooks. Warde (1997) (who has made an historical comparison of cookery columns) points out, for example, that cookery books, food journals and so on have no explicit theoretical base or analytic framework and do not necessarily represent actual cooking practices. For an informative, theoretical and analytic perspective of domestic cooking it was necessary to extricate information from a widespread food studies literature. Sociological and social-anthropological studies, mainly of food choice and consumption, proved to be the most useful.

These are described elsewhere (Short, 2003a and 2003b).

However, to understand more about cooking *skills*, including skills in general and debate about deskilling, there was a more specific literature to review.

The deskilling theory
Hypotheses about the deskilling and decline of domestic cooking came to prominence in the 1990s (Lang et al., 1996; Stitt, 1996; Ripe, 1993; Ritzer, 1996). They are generally based on a theory by Harry Braverman (1974), described in his book 'Labor and Monopoly Capital'. The book concerns the influence of technological, rationalised systems of production on the collective craft identity and the well-being and happiness of workers. Braverman argues that within rationalised, industrial systems, the worker performs only a simplified part of a complete task. He or she is divorced from the complete process, the conception and execution of that task. Braverman argues that this fragmented work leaves the worker deskilled, degraded and dissatisfied. The industrial deskilling process, he goes on to say, is self-perpetuating in that deskilled workers require ever more simplified and rationalised work.

One of a number of criticisms aimed at Braverman's work is that he does not comment on what happens in an industrialised society, to the skills, satisfactions and identifications of people working in the domestic environment. It has been suggested that he romanticises the traditional artisan and clings to a mechanistic conception of skill. Indeed, there are counter-arguments that technological change and new systems of production may give rise to new, possibly even superior, skills (Gabriel, 1990).

Deskilling and domestic cooking
The increased consumption, variety and availability of industrially pre-prepared food has suggested to some (see above) that a deskilling process similar to that described by Braverman as occurring in the workplace, is happening in the domestic environment, to cooking. Veronica Beechey (1982, p.54) however, in a paper that discusses Braverman's deskilling theory in relation to housework and housewives, argues that caution should be taken before

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transposing hypotheses onto the domestic environment. Labour processes in the workplace are valued differently to those in the home she points out, as are the skills involved in those processes. She argues that cooking has only ever been perceived as 'skilled' when performed by professional chefs working in commercial environments.

Current understandings and conceptualisations of domestic cooking skills

Knowledge about contemporary domestic cooking skills to inform the research was drawn from studies with a public health or education focus. However, these studies (see Dunmeyer-Stookey & Barker, 1994; Lang et al., 1996 and 1999; Nicolaas, 1995; Street, 1994; Wrieden et al., 2002), perhaps because their focus is not on cooking and cooking skills per se, were found to provide no definitions of 'cooking skills'. 'Cooking skills' was frequently found to be used vaguely and in reference to techniques (often culturally specific) and tasks such as braising or casseroling, jointing a chicken, making a white sauce, cooking beans and pulses, making shortcrust pastry and so on. Other related terms and concepts such as 'being skilled' (or otherwise), 'cook', 'from scratch', 'basic skills', 'ready-prepared foods', 'from scratch' were also found to be used inconsistently and without clear definition. Further, current discourse about (the decline, revision, reskilling or deskilling of) domestic cooking offered little explanation about how for example, cooking with pre-prepared foods requires and utilises different or less skills than cooking with fresh, raw foods or how contemporary kitchen technology routinises or changes cooking skills.

The complexity of skills

Many specialists warn about the dangers of over-simplifying skills and/or over-emphasising the mechanical aspects of practical tasks. Wellens (1974) cautions that a short, simple definition of skill is always misleading because it is such a *'complex concept'* (p.1). Singleton (1978) points out that all practical tasks require a combination of mechanical abilities, academic knowledge and 'tacit' perceptual, conceptual and planning skills. It is tacit skills he says, that are used to visualise the process of a task, plan and design it, and provide the confidence to carry it out.

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Both Wellens (1974) and Singleton (1978) also point out that terms such as 'skilled', 'unskilled' and 'skillful' are rarely linked to any actual, detailed appraisal of skills or skill levels but are used in a very narrow way relating solely to the mechanical aspect of a practical task. Wood (1982) argues that in the workplace these descriptive terms are used to differentiate between jobs and pay levels and are *'relatively independent of the real or 'technical'* skill content of jobs' (p.18).

Skills experts and researchers also explain that 'skills' can be defined, described and understood at different levels of detail. Finding the most informative level of detail for the study you are carrying out is generally considered by experts to be the key to useful skills research (Beechey, 1982; Lee, 1982). Further, essential to any understanding of disparities in ability between groups or individuals is the understanding that skills can be conceptualised according to the *'requirement of the job'* or *'the capabilities of the worker'* (Lee, 1982, pp 148–149).

Aims of the study

Many academics, including James and McColl (1997) and Lang et al. (1999), have pointed out that debate about the state of domestic cooking and cooking skills, and their influence on food preparation practices and food choices (and on health, well-being, family relationships and so on) remains speculative and difficult to develop because there is a deficit of research with a clear, theoretical and philosophical base that focuses specifically on cooking. As has been shown, the literature review carried out for this study substantiated this view.

Therefore, in order to further discourse and debate, the study aimed to provide a *'systematic framework for thinking'* (Murcott 1995, p.232) about, and detailed insight into, contemporary domestic cooking. A key requirement of the study was, therefore, to establish an empirically grounded and informative understanding of 'cooking skills'.

Methodological approach, design and process

In order to be exploratory, and to develop, explain and build knowledge, the research took a qualitative, interpretative approach. A qualitative approach was thought suitable

and useful for this study because it sought knowledge about individuals, the mundane and the everyday - social processes, social actions, feelings, meanings, beliefs and opinions - phenomena that are difficult to quantify (Bryman, 1998; Mason, 1996). Further, a qualitative approach was felt appropriate because the aim of the study was to understand domestic cooking in its entirety and from the perspective of the cook himself/herself (a domestic cook being taken as a person who has on at least one occasion prepared food, any food, for themselves or for others).

The research took the form of a two-stage study. It was not pre-designed as such but left open to develop in a way that data generation and analysis suggested would be most useful. This allowed data to be developed horizontally (exploration of a number of issues) and then vertically (a focused examination of emergent issues central to the development of the discourse described above) (Bauer & Aarts, 2000). Both stages were based around semi-structured interviews. The first also included the keeping of 'cooking diaries'. (Despite the practical nature of cooking, observation of people's cooking practices was not considered to be the most useful method of data generation for three reasons: firstly, because the research did not aim to appraise or measure people's skills: secondly, because of the 'unseen' nature of tacit skills: and thirdly, because of the foreseeable lengthy process involved in the researcher gaining acceptance in a private, domestic environment with no 'natural' role for the observer.)

'Middle-aged' couples (aged between thirty and fifty) from different social, financial and occupational backgrounds and household structures took part in the first stage of fieldwork. Because the first stage was exploratory and aimed to investigate a wide and diverse range of issues, couples were chosen because as individual data sources their experiences and views could provide depth (via different viewpoints of the same cooking experiences) whilst keeping diversity of data to a manageable level. Topics discussed with the informants included 'childhood experiences of cooking and eating', 'current cooking practices', 'the role of ready-meals', and 'typically British food'. After data from seven couples had been analysed, a number of recurrent themes relating to cooking ability, cooking

practices and approaches towards cooking, were evident.

A second stage of fieldwork substantiated, refined and explained the themes unearthed in stage one. Opinions, beliefs, values and practices were 'tested-out' on a purposefully sampled and very diverse (in terms of qualities such as age, gender, cooking experience, food provision responsibilities and so on) group of sixteen people from varied household structures. Informants included a pensioner, a single man living alone, a teenage catering student, an ex-chef and restaurant manager, a woman in her twenties who shared a flat with friends, a single mother on income support, a middle-aged and middle-class man with teenage children and so on. This enabled the study to determine those themes that 'held true' whatever the experience, food responsibilities, age and so on of the informant and were therefore indicative of a 'contemporary domestic cooking culture'. Further, the accounts of cooking from this varied group of people allowed for the finding and detailing of a wide range of 'cooking skills'. It is this aspect of the study that is focused on in this paper. Topics discussed in this second stage included 'the importance of learning to cook', 'using recipes' and 'making a pizza'.

In both stages, informants were selected opportunistically. Friends, colleagues and existing informants suggested individuals who they thought might make appropriate informants - for example, people they worked with, lived with or knew socially. Other individuals were given information about the study at colleges and workplaces. The suggestions and offers to take part were then followed up. If the 'qualities' of the people concerned were useful to the study at that point, then people were approached, given information about the study and asked if they would like to take part. This process of selection was especially appropriate in the second stage because a diverse sample from varied cultural settings and with a whole range of different qualities was required and a degree of relevant prior knowledge about those qualities was found to be useful.

For reasons of accessibility, both first and second stage informants came mostly from the Greater London area. However, the location of the data source or units was not considered a quality relevant to the

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research as its focus was on domestic cooking practices, approaches and skills and not on types of food chosen and, therefore, food availability. The interviews took place in the informants' own homes or workplaces and were recorded. All the informants were given a shopping voucher worth fifteen pounds as a 'thank-you'.

Data from both stages were transcribed literally, interpretively, reflexively and also 'creatively' in order to build up the 'bigger picture'. Coding and comparison were the main analysis tools used to move from the largely descriptive first stage to the explanatory second stage. Data displays, clustering and counting, causal networks and so on, word processing and qualitative research analysis software were all used to aid this process.

Findings

Analysis provided intricate detail and explanatory evidence about domestic cooking practices, cooking skills and approaches to cooking and the interrelationship that was found to exist between them. The study's findings showed that there was a relationship between the informants' cooking skills and knowledge and their cooking practices but that this relationship was not straightforward. These cooks did not use 'convenience' foods simply because they 'could not cook' and as a replacement for 'fresh', 'raw' foods (see Short, 2003, a and b).

Early findings suggested that, not only were 'cooking skills' more complex than has generally been understood (at least in the social sciences) but that there was also an intricate relationship between cooking abilities and approaches to cooking. Insight into the former, it was felt, would give insight into the latter. The findings in this study revealed a complexity to 'cooking skills' that has not, to date, been clearly acknowledged. These cooks used a range of different 'cooking skills' as they went about the business of preparing and cooking food (using both 'raw' and 'pre-prepared' foods, most usually in combination). They did use mechanical, technical skills but they also used perceptual and conceptual abilities, creative and organisational skills and academic knowledge. In addition, they used a number of 'difficult to classify' cooking skills such as preparing food to satisfy the

requirements and desires of others and cooking whilst simultaneously looking after children. As the informants talked about their cooking practices, beliefs and opinions about cooking and their cooking abilities, they referred to, or made apparent, various 'cooking skills' - which were then noted down and detailed during analysis. The following paragraphs briefly describe those 'cooking skills'. They illustrate that cooking skills and knowledge can be seen as complex, and as incorporating more than just practical, technical ability.

The informants used numerous mechanical skills. Pancakes were flipped, chips, pasta sauces and coffee were 'put in the microwave', mozzarella and bread sliced, eggs scrambled, potato waffles and chicken fried, eggs and sausages poached, cheese and carrots grated, pasta boiled, tins opened, cheese strings, frozen peas and chicken fillets unwrapped, fish fingers, pork chops and chicken nuggets grilled, cereals and milk poured - to name but a very few.

Domestic 'cooking skills' were found by the study to include perceptual understandings of the properties of foods (in terms of taste, colour and texture) and how they react when combined or when heated. *'You've got to get the consistency just right for a scone to be nice and light'* explained an experienced cook, showing an understanding of the link between the texture during the process of preparation and the final, cooked result. Margaret revealed an ability to judge the optimum moment at which to remove broad beans from boiling water (during the process of blanching them) in order to peel them most easily. Wayne's words on the other hand revealed that he uses perceptual skills when preparing frozen, pre-prepared chips - he judges when the oil has reached the ideal temperature to cook to them to an even, golden brown.

The study also found evidence of more sophisticated perceptual skills. Many of the cooks showed an ability to conceptualise the outcomes (in terms of taste, colour and texture) of mixing, heating and chilling foods ('raw', 'pre-prepared' or a combination of the two). These conceptual skills appeared often to form the basis of the informants' creative cooking abilities.

Liz said that she would often adapt food and recipes. *'Say I ate cheesecake [at a*

friends] then I basically know how to make a cheesecake but I might ask "what did you put in that?" or "did you do that first?"' Jules described how she occasionally recreates ready-meals she sees in supermarkets, she has the ability to conceptualise how the end result is reached and the perceptual and mechanical skills necessary to achieve that result.

A number of the cooks who informed the study spoke about 'using up leftovers' or in other words, designing meals or 'dishes' around available ingredients. *I may do a sandwich or something'* said Dean, *I'll look at it and think "yeh, I'll put this in and bung some mayonnaise on top of that as well"'.* Likewise, David said *I can always make a tomatoey based sauce and add whatever else I've got to it. I've usually got cheese to shove on top, [tinned tomatoes] and vegetables of some kind'.* These were skills that may or may not require conceptual ability. It was not always apparent that these cooks were aiming for a 'visualised' result.

'You don't stand and watch fish fingers cooking for ten minutes' said Liz *'you put them on and then go upstairs and get a load of washing, put it in the washing machine, turn the fish fingers over and then take the clean washing upstairs'.* Liz's words show how she uses timing skills and an organisational ability when cooking. For Wayne, preparing Sunday dinner 'with all the trimmings' has become a smoother, more organised and cleaner process the more practice he has had and the more timing skills he has acquired. *I can almost "wash as I go" sometimes'* he laughed. The organisational skills used by informants took a number of forms including the simultaneous cooking of a number of foods, cooking foods to be 'ready' for a specified time, and the 'fitting' of cooking around other tasks and activities.

The informants demonstrated academic knowledge of food hygiene, chemistry, nutrition and the history and geography of food, cooking and cuisine as well as of food fashions and the tastes, textures, flavours and combinations of ingredients that are considered complimentary and preferable within a generally recognised cuisine. *I just never know what herbs go with what'* said Claire, a young mother who frequently referred to her lack of confidence about

'cooking' (with both 'raw' and 'pre-prepared' foods).

Many other types of 'difficult to classify' cooking abilities were referred to, mentioned in passing or described in detail by the study's informants in their accounts of their day-to-day provisioning practices and approaches to cooking.

An ability to choose techniques and foods appropriate for the available resources and/or the occasion and/or the preferences or requirements of those for whom they were 'cooking' was frequently referred to. Geraldine spoke of cooking salmon in the microwave rather than wrapped in foil in the oven if she was in a hurry, Maureen of cooking favourite foods for friends coming for dinner. *I know what somebody likes and what they may not like so I judge it on the person'* she explained. Kate's words showed she used intricate menu-planning skills. She has to take into account she explained, the divergent tastes and preferences of her children, herself and her husband (as well as those of frequent guests) and the different times that they require food. Another woman's organisational cooking skills also involved 'creative efficiency'. Jules explained how she and her partner often prepare an evening meal that can be adapted with other ingredients and served, in a slightly different guise, the following day.

'Cooking under stress', perhaps when cooking for a special occasion or when cooking with small children 'underfoot' also gave rise to 'cooking skills'. *'As you get older the kitchen can become the hub of everybody's social activity'* said Kate. *'The worst scenario in the world is if kids are trying to pull your legs when you're at the hot cooker. It's dangerous and you are constantly moving your child away'.*

This description of 'cooking skills' reveals abilities and knowledge far more abstract in nature than the 'practical techniques' model that has often been used in research and debate. These abstract, perceptual and conceptual skills were apparent even at a very early age. One mother described how her children aged one and five, cook with her in the kitchen. *If you asked them to go and find some pasta or find some crisps they would both know where they were stored and what you did with them'* she explained, revealing their academic and perceptual

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knowledge. Her elder child's mechanical skills are also revealed to involve judgement abilities acquired through experience. *'If I was cooking vegetables he would chop them for me. He's learned to mind his fingers and which knives to use'* she added. Similarly, when Kate described how her three year old son is 'learning to cook' she did not mention either mechanical skills or practical techniques. *'He knows that the cooker is hot [and] wants to look in and see things happening'* she explained, *'He's trying to grasp a concept of the time and how long things take'.*

Questions raised and points for discussion

The study examined the skills used by domestic cooks to prepare and provide food for themselves, their friends and families. This person-centred approach to skills focuses on the 'capabilities and practices of the cook' rather than the 'requirements of the cooking-task', as a task-centred approach might. It shows how 'cooking skills' can be understood as being contextual in nature. For example, a cook making bread to a 'high technical standard', with the help of a recipe and without interruption would use a different set of skills to the cook making bread with no instruction but who does so whilst simultaneously washing-up and helping his or her children with homework. However, both tasks would require similar technical skills, perhaps 'mixing', 'kneading' and 'rolling'.

When 'cooking skills' are seen as contextual then it is possible to distinguish a set of *domestic* cooking skills, specific to *domestic* cooking. A professional cook and a domestic cook may both have, and use, 'cooking skills' such as the ability to chop quickly, to make a white sauce, or to make up a curry paste without recourse to instruction. However, they prepare food in different circumstances and with different resources and have skills that the other may not. A professional cook may be more likely to be able to, for example, prepare food to consistent standards day in and day out, share tasks with others, and organise simultaneous preparation of a number of different foods. A domestic cook may be more likely to be able to fit cooking around other tasks and activities, use up leftovers, prepare food to suit a range of tastes and dietary requirements and so on.

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As a small study of just thirty domestic cooks from the south east of England no claims are made as to this being a comprehensive set of 'domestic cooking skills'. (To classify 'cooking skills' was not a main aim of the study. Rather, as was explained earlier in this paper, the research examined cooking skills as part of the development of an empirically gathered and theoretically grounded 'way of thinking' about cooking and as insight into, and explanation of, domestic cooking practices.) The cooking skills and knowledge described here are merely the skills that were referred to, or became apparent, in the informants' accounts of their domestic cooking experiences and their beliefs about, and approaches towards, cooking. Indeed, there are indications in relevant literature that there are many other types of (domestic) 'cooking skills'. Demas (1995) for example, in describing the cooking skills acquired by children who took part in her interventionist cooking and food choice study, refers to 'estimation skills' - an ability to estimate quantities of ingredients that come with experience. Silva (2000) in a paper looking at cooks, cookers and gender issues in the domestic kitchen, points out that few researchers have ever referred in their analyses of kitchen work to the *'instruments that create the particular conditions in which cooking is accomplished'* (p.616). Cooking equipment, she argues, is intrinsically linked with what people cook, how they cook and their *'expectation of standards of cooking'* and hence the cooking skills and knowledge involved.

However, this new perspective and understanding of 'cooking skills' does offer some fresh insight into current discourses surrounding the state of domestic cooking and the opportunity to begin to move beyond mere speculation.

For example, Fieldhouse (1995), Stitt (1996), Ritzer (1996) and others (see Leith, 2001; Ripe, 1993; Rodrigues & de Almeida, 1996) have all implied in their work that pre-prepared foods 'do away' with, or reduce, the need for cooking skills; that the cook who uses 'pre-prepared foods' will apply and acquire less cooking skills. They tend to write from the perspective that 'cooking' and 'cooking skills' are concepts only applicable to the use of 'fresh', 'raw' foods. However, if contemporary domestic

'cooking skills' are understood to be the skills used by contemporary domestic cooks (and this is the philosophical stance taken by this study), and those cooks use both raw and pre-prepared foods (as this study showed they did, usually in combination [see also Short, 2003a and 2003b]), then 'cooking skills' in this instance cannot only be associated with the sole use of 'fresh', 'raw' foods. From this new perspective, 'cooking' with pre-prepared foods has to be acknowledged as involving 'cooking skills'.

Other findings of the study, not described in this paper, must be noted at this point. The research revealed that 'cooking from scratch' and 'cooking with pre-prepared foods' are not two separate and easily distinguishable food practices. Indeed, the study found that many terms and concepts used in current discourse, such as 'fresh', 'dish', 'cook', 'basic ingredients', and 'ready-prepared', were ambiguous in meaning and interpreted in many different ways by the informants (and, initially, by the researcher). It was found that terms such as 'pre-prepared', 'fresh' and 'convenience' did not relate to any particular degree of, or lack of, pre-preparation. By implication therefore, nor did the concept 'from scratch' have any precise meaning. Are breakfast cereals or bread 'pre-prepared'? Why did one informant consider frozen burgers as being a 'convenience' food but not a fresh sausage? What's the difference in pre-preparation between tinned tomatoes, 'passata' and tomato pizza topping? Would it be true to say that a tin of black bean cook-in sauce from Asda or Tesco would be more likely to be considered a 'pre-prepared' food than the back bean paste from the Chinese supermarket? Making a cake 'from scratch' may require that the cook open packets, tip out ingredients, mix, judge when the baked cake is 'ready' and perhaps do the washing up and answer the phone simultaneously - but so might making a cake with a 'packet mix'. See Short [2003, a and b] for further detail and explanation.

When the concept of domestic 'cooking skills' is understood as contextual and pertaining to both the use of 'raw' foods and 'pre-prepared' foods then these findings also raise questions about how to appraise people's skills and skill levels. It becomes difficult to compare the skills involved in devoting an entire afternoon to preparing sushi 'from scratch' and with the aid of a recipe to the skills involved in preparing fish fingers, chips and peas whilst simultaneously washing up and looking after three children. It seems perverse to argue that the person who occasionally makes scrambled eggs to a consistency deemed 'correct' by food writers and television chefs is more or less skilled than the person who regularly prepares a pasta dish for their family with a chilled, pre-prepared pasta sauce from the supermarket and 'what's left in the fridge'.

What is 'cooking ability'? What is a skilled cook? Are there technical standards to be reached or does the domestic cook merely have to be able to produce food that is generally considered edible? Do domestic cooks need to know how a technique or food fits into say, British, French or Australian cuisine as a professional cook might? In what way does the use of pre-prepared foods contribute to the decline of the intergenerational transference of cooking skills when the parent or guardian who 'cooks' with a high quantity of 'pre-prepared' foods may not necessarily be using less cooking skills, or be 'less skilled', than the parent or guardian who uses a greater quantity of 'fresh' foods?

How do technological advances in kitchen and cooking equipment change or eradicate cooking skills? The findings of this current study suggest that there may be little difference in the skills involved in for example, scrambling eggs in the microwave and scrambling them in a pan on an electric or gas hob. Both require that eggs are broken and mixed together, seasoned as desired and stirred to some degree as they cook. In both cases the cook has to judge when the eggs are 'cooked' to the desired degree. This may even require greater skill when unseen and happening at a much greater speed in the microwave. Indeed Silva (2000) suggests that microwaves tend only to be used to re-heat food and drink and have never replaced the thermostatically controlled gas or electric ovens, as was originally intended, because 'cooking' (as opposed to re-heating) food in the microwave requires greater skill and/or a more skilled cook.

In a report of research into food practices in English households, Warde and Hethrington (1994) describe barbecuing as *relatively unskilled* (p.764). In doing so they are

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taking a largely task-centred, simple and technique-based approach that does not take into account the skills involved in cooking with unregulated heat, amidst a busy crowd and in the open air. Similarly, Ritzer (1996, p.102) states without question that cooking with microwaves, recipes, pre-prepared foods and packet mixes *'requires few and easy skills',* resembles *'painting by numbers',* and promotes deskilling.

When Lang and Caraher (2001) posit the 'Cooking Skills Transition thesi' or the *'shifts in the pattern and kind of skills required to get food onto tables and down throats'* (p.2) they too appear to be taking a task-centred approach and looking at the 'requirements of the cooking task'. This present study on the other hand, by taking a contextual and 'person-centred' approach that focuses on the 'capabilities and practices of the cook', highlights instead the potentially changeless and constant nature of certain 'cooking skills' - judging when food is 'cooked', for example, creating a meal from 'what's in the cupboard', organising food preparation to fit into a busy day and so on.

Though it has raised many pertinent issues and questions for current discourse and concerns about the state of contemporary domestic cooking, this study has only begun the exploration of the nature of cooking ability - cooking skills and knowledge. More extensive research that recognises the contextual nature, cultural differentiation and the 'task-centred' and 'person-centred' duality of 'cooking skills' is required before a definitive typology can be established and debates about deskilling and reskilling, the decline of the intergenerational transference of cooking ability, the influence of socio-economic factors on skills application and acquisition and so on can be answered.

> **"** 'cooking' (as opposed to re-heating) food in the microwave requires greater skill and/or a more skilled cook. **"**

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> " In what way does the use of pre-prepared foods contribute to the decline of the intergenerational transference of cooking skills? "