

## M/C Journal, Vol. 16, No. 3 (2013) - 'cookbook'

### Cookbooks, High-tech Kitchens, and Gender Culture: Addressing the Sugar and Spice in Contemporary Couple Relations

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#### Ingredients: Men, Women, Modern Kitchens, and the Gender Culture

For working couples, the end of the day brings to the middle-class family with children the need to prepare the evening meal. Beyond an instrumental task to be performed, the kitchen space is hereafter the *locus* where the gender culture becomes visible. Who cooks? How does he/she cook? How good does he/she cook?

In answering these questions, two main variables of context have to be clearly addressed. Firstly, contemporary gender culture promotes both men and women as "equal potential cooks." Claims for gender equality are pervasive in the kitchen space, traditionally occupied by women, whose socialisation to be a "perfect housewife" served as a guarantee that they would "naturally" be good cooks, as well as good wives and mothers (Parsons and Bales). Currently, however, because individuals are now less defined by the traditional gender roles (Beck, Giddens, and Lash), one can expect either the man or the woman, or both, to prepare meals. From "sacrifice to gift" (Kaufmann), the possibilities are as numerous as the individuals who carry with them different and multiple socialisation processes that they differently mobilise in distinctive settings (Lahire).

Secondly, the space of the kitchen has never been so technologically advanced as today. Contrary to images of a tiring, time-consuming, and demanding family workspace, the contemporary kitchens are equipped with such machinery assuring for efficiency, time domain, and aesthetic appeal (Daly, Gillis, Kaufmann, and Silva). Moreover, a paraphernalia of highly sophisticated equipment promises to help even the most awkward to be a successful and impressive *chef*. Nonetheless, the kitchens' space has not ceased to be a profound and complex arena of family life, intimacy, and sociability (Southerton). Additionally, tradition, cultural heritage, knowledge, expertise, tenderness, pleasure, love, passion, and even sex: those are some of the "ingredients" with which media and popular culture socially construct the kitchen's space (see for instance, the films *Woman on Top*, and *Eat Pray Love*, and television series *Hell's Kitchen* featuring chef Gordon Ramsay).

In this paper, I analyse the exploitation of the cookbook as an instrument used by some women aiming to encourage a greater participation rate among men in the cooking task. To study this topic was not an initial aim of research. Instead, it has emerged in the broader context of a previous sociological research devoted to the study of family practices (Morgan, *Family Connections* and *Rethinking Family Practices*), specifically family rituals within Portuguese middle-class families (Costa). Data was collected through episodic interviews (Flick) applied to both men and women with at least one child between the age of 3 and 14 years old. In this major study, a theoretical sample (Glaser and Strauss) of 30 individuals (with a mean age of 38 years old) were asked to describe in detail their "normal" and "special" moments or days. Through a subsequent content analysis (Bardin) carried out with the qualitative software NVivo (developed by QSR ©International), the cooking task has emerged from the data as a meaningful category. Findings presented and discussed hereafter are based upon the interviewees's accounts that focus on a very circumscribed phase of their daily life, namely when they arrive home at the end of the day and need to prepare a "good," "quick" meal. Particularly, in the case of the men's accounts, the mention to the ways women urge men to participate (more) in the cooking tasks become prominent when talking about the use of the *Bimby* and its correlated recipe book. The *Bimby* (*Thermomix*) is a multi-function food processor intended for domestic use, commercialized by German company *Vorwerk* since the 1970s, yet only more recently having gained wide popularity in Portugal (Truninger).

In short, this text focuses on the cookbook and related “mundane practices” (Martens) within the context of the appropriation of high-tech equipment in the kitchen to discuss the power of the socialisation of gender. Our argument is that cookbooks can be a way to dissipate the old difficulties that men, particularly, face in the kitchen; and at the same time, their use (and misuse) reinforces the persistence of some gaps due to previous and unequal socialisation regarding cookery as a skill.

### **Preparation: Places, Spaces, Tasks, and (Traditional) Social Roles**

When arriving home early in the evening, both men and women usually occupy different spaces and perform different tasks, thus assuming distinctive social roles (Costa). Notwithstanding some recent changes causing a greater participation of men in domestic life (Wall, Aboim, and Cunha), Portuguese families still experience a very unequal household division of labour. At the same time that Portuguese women participate strongly in the paid work economy, especially on a full-time basis, they also undertake the majority of the household chores—both in number and time spent in doing so—such as the regular tasks of cooking, washing, and cleaning (Aboim, Wall and Amâncio).

In most cases analysed in this study, there also remains a clear division of tasks concerning the preparation of the daily evening meal. Whereas the woman frequently prepares the evening meal, the man more often performs complimentary tasks such as setting the table for dinner and, afterwards, putting the dishes in the dishwasher and removing them once washed. Underlying this, couples seem to have negotiated an “agreement of exchange,” where women are responsible for a particular task, while men preferably “assume” or “choose another one.” Hence, insofar as women assume the task of cooking on a regularly basis, the participation of men in the preparation of meals is far more episodic (for example, at the weekend, for parties, at Christmas time or on some other special day or occasion). This can explain why men more often refer to the exact content of the daily meals they prepare as relatively “simple” and “fast”—dishes such as “grilled,” “tidbits,” “fries,” or precooked food for microwave are common.

The “unpreparedness” or “lack of practice” of men and, consequently, the “greater experience” and/or “preparation” of their wives/partners are, coincidentally, evoked to justify why men do not participate more in the meal preparation. Both men and women refer either to the “tradition” or to a certain “naturalisation” of the women’s skills as the main arguments for the way they share tasks around the evening meal. Actually, most of the men who were interviewed admitted not being “ready” or “prepared” to perform specific tasks once married or living with a partner. The “blame” seems to be in the fact that they were not socialised to clean, wash, or cook when unmarried. When living with their parents, they were responsible for only minor tasks like tidying up their rooms, making their beds, or taking out the garbage. At other times, they may have “aided” their parents, yet only when “asked to do so.”

In fact, when compared to women, these men were not domestically socialised as children or teenagers. Let us also remember that many came directly from their origin families into a procreation family. Thus, when they entered into a marital status, the task of cooking passed “automatically and intuitively” from their mothers into the hands of their wives/partners. Only with the (rare) deliberate refusal of the woman to cook does the male’s unpreparedness to cook become an issue and (may be) regarded as a problem in the couple’s relationship. The unpreparedness of males to cook is particularly evident in the absence of women, notably in post-divorce situations. Those who had performed cooking tasks previously or during the marriage were usually better prepared. For others, carrying out these tasks, either by choice or by imposition (for example, due to financial difficulties in the post-divorce period), meant facing many internalised social constraints. The support from close female figures (mother, friends, girlfriend, or colleagues) seems to be crucial in the path of self-instruction. The cookbook is both a new and old instrument that (also) serves this purpose.

### **Variation: Bringing Men into the Kitchen with Cookbooks**

At this point, a variation is introduced in the gender division of labour related to the food preparation noted above. It is true that the generalisation of technology for cooking has followed in time the entry of men into the kitchen. In this context, I now turn upon specific accounts of men when referring to the use of the *Bimby* (*Thermomix*) in association with its recipe book. This food processor combines the functions of various utensils and small kitchen appliances: "it minces, chops, purees, weighs, stirs, grates, grinds, blends, cooks and simmers; in fact, it does the work of at least twelve kitchen devices and practically cleans itself when food preparation is done" (Vorwerk). Additionally, in order to be exploited to the fullest, the *Thermomix* comes with a cookbook whose instructions should be, it states, strictly followed. With this appliance, offering 12 functions in one single product, one can cook "everyday meals or elaborate menus, European or Asian specialties" (Vorwerk), with the guarantee that including soups, main courses and desserts, "everything turns out delicious" (Vorwerk).

Pedro is 35; he has been married since 2000 and is the father of two boys, one 7 and the other 4 years old. His wife offered him this machine and corresponding cookbook with the aim of "encouraging" him to undertake some cooking tasks. However, he admits, "the result was only partially achieved." He points out: "I can cook with the *Bimby* ... and even more through the *Bimby*; I admit, than with pots and all that." Although strictly following the cookbook, Pedro recognises that he always "needs more time [than his wife] to make things work well in the kitchen." Pedro feels that he lacks the "experience" and "training" that enables his wife to cook everything "very fast": "Cooking very [emphasis added], very fast, honestly: I can't! She can do it even when she is in a hurry ... If I have to read the recipes ... I have to take enough time to read and interpret them! And she ... she usually does it ... she doesn't even have to think about it!" The gift of the *Bimby* was a purposeful means of trying to overcome some of the difficulties Pedro has in the kitchen. Metaphorically, I envisage it as a kind of "sugar" aimed to sweeten Pedro's lack of cooking skills: "She [his wife] offered me the *Bimby* but ... the problem, I already told her 'I could cook, but you have to give me enough time to cook!'"

Surprisingly in relation to such a piece of equipment that promotes itself as "the most superior kitchen appliance" (Vorwerk), using it is not simple for Pedro. The explanation, again, seems to be in the fact that his wife—in his perspective—does everything so "routinely" and in such an "intuitive" way that he can't follow her example, despite using the cookbook. Additionally, his "inexperience," "uncertainty," and "slowness" sometimes rouses a lack of patience in his wife who, in turn, embodies all the opposite attributes. Sometimes, he says, the situation comes to a point where she tells him: "at this pace, it's not worth it!" These are the cases where the kitchen overflows to an arena of tension, eventually even conflict, between knowing and doing (Casimiro). Pedro then "gets annoyed," especially when his wife wants to set a pace he cannot keep up with: "Often I tell her 'if you want to explain things to me, you have to waste some time with it.' If you do not want to waste time, it [my cooking] is not worth it!"

Rui is 34, lives in a de-facto union and is the father of two boys, one four years of age and the youngest one-year-old. His example adds to the case of Pedro. The *Bimby* is also the "only cooking experience" Rui has beyond the grill. He admits he uses it, especially to cook soups for his youngest child, but still he prefers to leave his wife responsible for that task while he performs others. He recognises that using the *Bimby*, the task of cooking the soups is "fairly easy." However, not everything runs smoothly: "Once I forgot to add water [laughs]; nonetheless, it went well [laughs]; it was not so bad! [laughs]"

The irony is that Rui reveals how he generally prefers to leave the kitchen to this wife:

I have a script for kitchen because we have the famous *Bimby*, you've heard about it, right? Ok! I have a cookbook with a script of how to make the soup ... Honestly, I have done it four or five times, no more than that. I'd rather clear up the kitchen, wash the baby bottles, clean up the room, to put one of the kids to bed; these are *my* evening' tasks. Not the soup because I ... I ... I even

strive to do it ... but the true is that it does not always run smoothly.

Both Pedro and Rui reveal the tensions some men face when appropriating kitchen appliances in the context of the contemporary couple's relationships claiming of equality. Purposely used by some women as a dose of "sugar," it eventually ends up to "spicing" rather than "sweetening" the relationship. At first sight, the use of the cookbook enables even the most unprepared individual to succeed in the kitchen. Nonetheless, as in the above cases, some men carry with them the (absence) of a socialisation for cooking that strongly shapes their use (and misuse) of the cookbook. The evoked arguments strongly emphasise the "tradition," "experience," "training," "practice" and "mastery" they lack when compared to women. While this can be the epicentre of existing tensions between the couple, it underlines subtle yet profound socialisation processes, internalised values, and social roles. In questioning these complex relations, the transforming power of the cookbook has to be put in relative terms, since it allows—at least sometimes—for only a skin-deep change.

### **Serving: The Cookbook—Sugar or Spice?**

Notwithstanding the several possible approaches to gendered culture in the kitchen, this text had no quantitative, generalisation, class, or culture comparative purpose. Instead, through a qualitative and in-depth approach, its main goal was to explore both the power and the limits of the cookbook as an instrument sometimes used by women aiming a greater participation of men in the cooking tasks. This arises as a particularly interesting issue in a context where men admitted that they were not domestically socialised as children or teenagers to clean, wash, or cook and, additionally, many of them went directly from their origin families into a procreation family.

Summing up, cookbooks are not magical devices that can erase, at once, the complex and profound socialisation processes, internalized values, and social roles. In context, the cookbook can be either "sugar" or "spice" at the top of the gender culture. While, at the forefront, it can be purposely used by women to overcome some of the hardships men face at the kitchen; in the background its use (and misuse) reinforces the persistence of some gaps (still) unveiled through a previous and wider socialisation for cooking.

More and more visible in contemporary society as either family or cultural heritage artefacts, media products or scientific outputs, cookbooks remain a site of endless interest, and this is also true in the sociological enquiry. In this article, analysing the use of a specific cookbook by men provides a forum through which the gender cultures can be examined in a simultaneously creative and fruitful way. As in the kitchen, one just has to "light the stove".

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