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# Feeding the extended family: gender, generation, and socioeconomic disadvantage in food provision to children

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## ABSTRACT

This paper examines how US parents and grandparents describe their provision of food to preschool-age children. Drawing on forty-nine interviews with sixteen families, most of which were socioeconomically disadvantaged, it is argued that gender and generation intersect in everyday efforts to care for children's eating. The analysis explores gendered divisions of foodwork, highlights the struggles of single mothers, and examines fathers' redefinitions of the paternal role to include feeding and caring for children. At the core of the analysis, however, is the participants' emphasis on grandmothers as sources of knowledge and support, with both fathers and mothers citing grandmothers and other women of earlier generations as culinary influences and as role models for good parenting. The article thus discusses "feeding the extended family," and concludes with a discussion about moving beyond the couple-focused paradigm of parenting in research on food and the gendered division of foodwork.

## KEYWORDS

Fatherhood; feeding the family; food; gendered division of labor; grandparental support; housework; motherhood

## Introduction

This paper examines food provision to young children in US families, as described by parents and grandparents. Through forty-nine interviews with sixteen families, most of which were socioeconomically disadvantaged, we find that stories about food and feeding reveal how gender and generation intersect in everyday efforts to care for children's eating. We first explore how parents' and grandparents' stories reveal a gender-unequal division of foodwork, and how this division is also connected to single motherhood, as expressed, for example, in the gap between idealized mothering and mothers' actual capacity to meet this ideal. We then explore participants' stories about involved fathers who, in a redefined paternal role, are responsible for feeding and caring for children.

The main finding, however, is the extent to which parents rely on grandparental support, and especially on grandmothers, in feeding young children. Grandmothers' roles span from sporadic childcare assistance to step-in parenting to support their single-parent children (mostly single mothers but also some single fathers). Furthermore, both fathers and mothers cite grandmothers and other women of earlier

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generations as culinary influences and as role models for good parenting. We demonstrate how the feeding of the extended family provides a lens onto the inter-connections between gender and generationality. We argue that studies concerning gender and food should go beyond the narrow focus on the division of work between coupled partners and acknowledge the inter-generational aspects of the gendering of food, as expressed in contemporary food provision to children and in long-term social change around child feeding and caregiving.

### **Gender and domestic foodwork—mothers, fathers, and grandparents**

In 1991, a classic book on the gendered division of domestic food responsibilities was published: Marjorie DeVault's *Feeding the Family: The Social Organization of Caring as Gendered Work* (1991). DeVault argued that, among US families, everyday food responsibilities were at the core of family (re)production and gender relations. While her study focused on food, it was part of a larger set of feminist sociology illuminating how gender relations and power imbue everyday life and gain expression in housework; notable works include seminal texts such as those of Hochschild (1989) and Oakley (1974).

This close connection between gender and food has proven to be relevant still (e.g., Abbots, Lavis, and Attala 2015; Anving and Sellerberg 2010; Holm et al. 2015; Julier 2013; McPhail, Beagan, and Chapman 2012; Meah 2014; Szabo 2011). In particular, Cairns and Johnston (2015) recently published a book based on interviews about everyday food responsibilities and mothering with women in Canada and the United States. Based on their findings, they argued that the women pursued an act of “calibration” in which they struggled to eat healthy, consume ethically, and feed their children properly while at the same time “tread[ing] lightly to avoid associations with feminized pathologies (e.g., the over-involved mother, the obsessive health nut, or the self-righteous ethical consumer)” (Cairns and Johnston 2015, 32).

However, the connection of food with femininity was also classed, with working-class women struggling to live up to middle-class culinary standards, constrained both by time and by financial resources. This resonates with Parsons' findings, based on 75 asynchronous online interviews focused on food, which were conducted with 49 women and 26 men in the UK (Parsons 2015a, 2016). Here, the food responsibilities of everyday life were connected to a responsabilization of individual women to eat and provide “good” and “healthy” food. This feminized discourse of “healthy” eating and feeding, Parsons argues, reflects culturally appropriate notions of mothering and femininity. Further, Parsons suggests that, in the interviews, gender intersected with class through “rigid scripts of the ‘working-class mum’ who feeds her children convenience food”—social scripts that were (re)produced in the individual interview texts (Parsons 2016, 394).

While domestic food responsibilities continue to be put mostly on women's shoulders and to be associated with a caring and other-oriented form of mothering and femininity, in the last decade research targeting men has provided a more nuanced picture of food and gender (see Szabo and Koch 2017). Several of these studies, though not all of them (e.g., Beagan et al. 2008; Fielding-Singh 2017; van Hooff 2011), indicate that food provision is increasingly becoming central to men's definitions of self and a crucial part of their fathering. This has led Aarseth (2009) to propose, based on a sample of middle-class Norwegians, that cooking is becoming degendered, marking a transition from

a female homemaker model to a joint domestic commitment of partners engaged in consumer-oriented lifestyle projects. Whether or not this suggestion is transferable to other contexts is yet to be examined, but the literature does, at least, suggest that in several parts of the Global North, Scandinavia especially, domestic food responsibilities are no longer taken for granted as “women’s work,” nor is the feeding of the family confined only to mothers. Over the past decade, qualitative studies from North America (Sellaeg and Chapman 2008; Szabo 2013, 2014), the UK (Meah 2017; Metcalfe et al. 2009; Owen et al. 2010), France (Kaufmann [2005] 2010), and Scandinavia (Aarseth 2009; Aarseth and Olsen 2008; Neuman, Gottzén, and Fjellström 2017a, 2017b) have supported this trend. However, in contrast to the rich literature on gendered foodwork focused on women, the literature on men largely does not explore social differentiations among groups of men and remains problematically skewed toward men of higher socioeconomic status. Men struggling with unemployment, with single parenthood, or with socioeconomic disadvantage are not completely absent from the literature (e.g., Meah 2017; Neuman 2016; Parsons 2015b; Szabo 2013, 2014), but studies that focus on these men are still in the minority. The problem with this asymmetry of social position is that it runs the risk of over-interpreting socioeconomically advantaged men’s “progressiveness” while at the same time reproducing an image of less privileged men as “conservative” or backward. This is a strength of our sample, in which several of the participating men struggled as single fathers and with economic hardships.

Last but not least, the literature on gender and domestic foodwork, as well as sociological research on the gendered division of housework in general, is overwhelmingly couple-focused. Still, quantitative evidence suggests that, in the United States, grandparents are likely to take part in childcare as well, with the level of involvement being partially dependent on structural conditions. Census data have estimated that during a typical week in spring 2011, 32 percent of US preschoolers under the age of 5 were cared for by grandparents and 29 percent by fathers, if the mother (who, with few exceptions, was the reference parent) was employed (Laughlin 2013). The numbers were higher for women in part-time employment and mothers who worked nonday shifts (where the majority of work hours are between 4 p.m. and 8 p.m.). Moreover, for women who were not married, for any reason (separated, divorced, never married, widowed), the share of fathers engaged in caring was lower, and the share of grandparents was higher. Similar trends connected to employment conditions were found concerning the care of children age 5 to 14 years old, with the main difference being that the share of fathers (24 percent) was higher than the share of grandparents (17 percent).

In sum, this indicates that (1) grandparents play an important role in childcare, (2) the share of childcare provided by fathers or grandparents might shift with the child’s age, and (3) childcare support is increasingly important for women in employment. The third point, regarding the importance of grandparental childcare support for women entering the labor market, is also confirmed in research from the UK (Gray 2005). Our own research has also highlighted how economic exigencies lead parents to rely on grandparents for childcare, and how this reliance leads parents to relax their child feeding rules when the children are in their grandparents’ charge, so as to maintain the familial balance of childcare (Eli et al. 2016). Nevertheless, whereas the role of grandparental involvement has been recognized in recent publications on child feeding and physical activity (Eli et al. 2016; Farrow 2014) as well as childhood obesity (Pocock et al.

2010), this perspective, to our knowledge, remains largely absent from research focusing on the gendered division of domestic foodwork. By including grandparents in our sample, we argue not only that feeding the family is a nodal point in the gendered organization of care work, but also that feeding the *extended* family is a way to conceptualize transitions in gender relations and their inter-connectedness with generationality.

## Method and data

This paper draws on semi-structured interviews conducted in 2011 with forty-nine members (twenty-two parents and twenty-seven grandparents) of sixteen families residing in Eugene, Oregon. All participants were parents or grandparents of a child aged 3–5 years, and a minimum of one parent and one grandparent per family was required for a family to be included in the study. The family was included if at least one grandparent was actively involved in their grandchild's life, defined as spending time with the child on at least two occasions per month. Participants were recruited using advertisements published on Craigslist (a popular online platform for classified ads) and in a local newspaper. The participants contacted the researchers in response to the advertisements; thus, all participants were self-selected. The participant recruitment procedures and the study's methods have been described in detail elsewhere (Eli et al. 2014a, 2014b, 2016). The study was reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board of the last author's institution. All participants received an information sheet concerning the study and provided written consent. The names used in this paper are pseudonyms.

Each participant completed a sociodemographic questionnaire with questions on education, employment, family and living conditions, and participated in a one-on-one interview with a researcher. Anthropometric measures (of the preschooler in focus and of the adult participants) were also taken, but these are not of relevance to the present paper. For descriptive characteristics of the sample, see [Table 1](#).

Participant interviews were conducted by two interviewers: the last author (a post-doctoral researcher) and a research assistant. Two interview guides were developed, one for grandparents and one for parents, focusing on the same main questions and topics. Each interview guide also included a structure for follow-up questions, depending on how each participant responded. All interviews were video recorded, in order to capture the participants' non-verbal gestures and expressions. The interviews were transcribed verbatim by student research assistants at the last author's institution.

In each family, the interviews focused on the same child, a preschooler aged 3–5 years. Questions focused on the child's feeding, physical activity, and body weight, and on the adult participants' memories of their own childhood feeding, physical activity, and body weight. The questions were thus not directed at studying gender relations. This means that some information relevant for this paper might have been missed due to the focus of the interviews. For example, a participant statement that reveals much about gender dynamics might not have been probed further because it was judged as outside the scope of the study. At the same time, it is also a strength that these stories emerged in response to questions about food and physical activity rather than in response to an interview guide that explicitly focused on gender. For example, if the aim of the study had been to investigate (un)involved fatherhood in relation to food,

**Table 1.** Descriptive statistics of the sample

Factor	Child (n = 16)	Parent (n = 22)	Grandparent (n = 27)
Mean age (range)	4.6 (3.1–5.7)	32.2 (22.7–49.5)	56.9 (43.0–77.9)
Gender:			
Female	8 (50%)	14 (64%)	21 (78%)
Male	8 (50%)	8 (36%)	6 (22%)
Race/ethnicity:			
Euro-American	11 (68%)	21 (95.5%)	23 (84%)
Native American	0	1 (4.5%)	0
Asian American	0	0	1 (4%)
African-American	0	0	1 (4%)
Mixed	5 (32%)	0	2 (8%)
Highest school grade completed:	n/a		
High school		18 (82%)	20 (74%)
College/university		4 (18%)	7 (26%)
Marital status:	n/a		
Married		6 (27%)	10 (37%)
Separated		1 (4.5%)	1 (4%)
Divorced		7 (32%)	14 (51%)
Single (never married)		7 (32%)	1 (4%)
Engaged		1 (4.5%)	0
Widowed		0	1 (4%)
Employment status:	n/a		
Full time		7 (32%)	8 (30%)
Part time		4 (18%)	4 (15%)
Not employed		11 (50%)	15 (55%)
Annual household income:	n/a		
Less than 14,999 USD		8 (36%)	7 (26%)
15,000–24,999 USD		6 (27%)	6 (22%)
25,000–39,999 USD		4 (18%)	6 (22%)
More than 40,000 USD		4 (18%)	8 (30%)

then fathers might have been more tempted to give “socially acceptable” answers about being gender-equal and caring, or perhaps to decline participation due to a concern about being judged. We therefore contend that the initial structure and aim of the interviews and interview questions can be seen as both a weakness and a strength. Moreover, the multi-generational and socioeconomic focus of the sample is a strength of the study. First, the sample allowed us to compare stories about the same family and child from at least two perspectives, seeing how different family members confirmed or challenged each other’s stories; this supports the study’s trustworthiness (Guba 1981). Furthermore, the sample allowed us to address a notable gap in the literature, with interview data from (and about) men who were mostly defined as socioeconomically disadvantaged.

The analysis was performed primarily by the first author. The second and last authors were already well acquainted with the data and had published other findings from the data elsewhere (Eli et al. 2014a, 2014b, 2016); they reviewed the first author’s codes, adding to them as needed. In the first stage, the coding was open-ended. After the first author coded about a third of the interviews, the second and last authors reviewed the codes and indicated agreements and disagreements. Based on this procedure, the rest of the data were coded with a focus on the emerging themes, and the first third of the interview transcripts were re-analyzed accordingly. The second and last authors reviewed the codes and discussed the analysis again with the first author,

reaching consensus on the focus for the paper. The analysis, therefore, was a thorough and collaborative effort between a scholar new to the data and two who were already well acquainted with it. However, one limitation was that only the third author had also interviewed the participants, and thus the other two authors did not have access to the same degree of context gleaned through participant gestures and non-verbal language. This issue was handled through close communication between the first and the third author, so as to contextualize the transcripts further.

Our analysis was informed by theoretical frameworks of “good grandparenting” as a liminal caretaking position. These frameworks elucidate ideals of grandparenthood in Euro-American societies as a sometimes-conflicting combination of presence in grandchildren’s lives, performances of care, and non-interference in parents’ caregiving practices (Brenehy et al. 2013; Hebblethwaite 2015; May, Mason, and Clarke 2012). This analytic process resulted in the development of two broad themes concerning the intersections of gender and generationality. These themes are presented below.

## Findings

### ***Grandmothers as co-parents: feeding, caring and “good” mothering in the absence of men***

The first theme focuses on the reproduction of gender-unequal patterns in the provision of food, as narrated by the participants. As we will demonstrate, this reproduction represents a “traditional” gendered division of foodwork but also reflects the struggles of single mothers and the exigencies of shared parenting with grandparents and other non-parent relatives. Grandmothers primarily step in as helpers when needed by their daughters, but some grandmothers play the role of co-parent to substitute for uninvolved fathers and support their single-mother daughters. In some cases, grandmothers’ co-parenting roles are situated within a multi-generational household, with some single mothers and fathers having continued to live in their family home or having moved back because of financial constraints.

Stacey was one of these single moms, who recently moved out after living with her mother. Stacey was interviewed about her daughter Rachel. The support she received in raising Rachel mostly came from her mother Carol, and sometimes also from Rachel’s aunt (on Rachel’s father’s side). Stacey and the interviewer discussed whether she and Carol disagreed about how to feed Rachel, leading to a discussion of parent-grandparent negotiations regarding healthy foods—a concern shared by all the study’s families (see Eli et al. 2016). But there was more to Stacey’s story than the intersection of gender and generation in how healthiness of food was described. The interviewer probed further into what might explain the difference in views between Stacey and her mother:

Interviewer: How come you think like this and not your mom?

Stacey: I don’t know, she’s kind of weird when it comes to food, like she doesn’t eat—ever. Especially since we moved out, she doesn’t really cook a lot. Like when I was growing up she cooked a lot, she cooked every night so, and then I moved out when I was 13 and it was just her and my stepdad and when I was 15 they broke up and she’s been on her own ever since,

so she can just cook a box of pasta and just eat some of that and that will be leftovers for a couple days and she won't cook again for a couple days or she'll buy a little bag of Cheetos or buy a bagel on her way to work and that's kind of how she eats, which is weird to me.

Stacey's explanation told a story of eating and feeding that extended beyond children's healthy meals. Hers was a story of two women, both leading economically disadvantaged lives, who were left to care for their children as single mothers. Stacey and her mother represented a common pattern in our sample: a mother who was left with the lion's share—sometimes the whole share—of childcare responsibilities, but who persevered thanks to help from other women. In Stacey's case, her mom was such an important part of childcare that, in Stacey's words, "she [was] like the dad." Stacey's ex-partner—her daughter's biological father—left her early on, and she barely had any contact with him. She described struggling to provide her daughter with nutritious food and establish a healthy lifestyle for her, despite economic hardships. Furthermore, that Stacey's mother could allegedly "just cook a box of pasta," buy Cheetos, or consume a bagel was expressed as a "weird" food habit, understood in relation to Stacey's childhood memories of a mother who cooked for her every night.

When interviewed, Stacey's mom, whom Stacey described as highly influential in her own life, also talked about culinary influences from *her* mom (i.e., Stacey's grandmother and Rachel's great-grandmother). Other participants provided similar intergenerational accounts. One of these participants was Sandra, a single mother to Edgar. Sandra described her grandmother as "definitely a traditional grandmother, she stayed at home, she was a stay-at-home wife, she did lots of cooking," while her parents were described as involved but with a stereotypically gendered division of housework and food responsibilities. "My mom cooked and we were not allowed to eat a lot of sugary processed foods," she said, adding a little later "[w]hen my dad cooked, it was pizza night so it was definitely my mom who played more of a role in that." When interviewed herself, Sandra's mother expressed the same thing: "always cooked, always have ... I did all that."

Notably, Sandra's mother's food provision activities extended beyond her role as mother; she also cooked for her grandson. Sandra and Edgar had lived with Sandra's mother, who cooked for them while they shared a household; however, she continued cooking for Edgar even after Sandra and Edgar had moved, and despite seeing them less regularly. As Sandra said, her mother was still "very on board about making sure that he gets a well-balanced [diet] and low on the sugar content." Furthermore, she was also said to be "really strict specialized, like, almost like vegan diet for health problems so, the food that she eats and what she has at her house when Edgar is there is like really restrictive." Thus, not only did Sandra's mother continue to play a role in Edgar's feeding, but Sandra also claimed her mother was more nutritionally strict in what she offered Edgar. When asked about how she viewed grandparents' roles in a child's lifestyle, Sandra responded:

Sandra: Um, well I think it's pretty important, obviously my mom has been a big role in his life. I mean she was a second parent to him from the time he was one, I mean we moved out here when he was one. Until we moved into our own

place last summer. So for two years she was a second parent in the household, so definitely she plays a significant role, even though we don't see her as much, we still see her often. . . . Um his grandparents in [another state], he loves them all, he loves my dad, he loves [his father's] parents. I think that he feels really, really treasured by all of them. Which you know even if I don't agree with the foods they feed him, I think that takes second place to how loved he feels and treasured he feels. . . .

While Sandra stated that grandparental influence, in general, was important in children's lives, she immediately highlighted her mother's influence specifically, seeing her as "a second parent" for the first two years of Edgar's life. Thus, as shown in this quote, and expressed elsewhere in the interview, other relatives, including men, were significant in Edgar's life. But their importance and involvement in his life did not come close to that of his maternal grandmother.

Another central issue Sandra touched upon was the role of household structure in shaping parental and grandparental caretaking dynamics. Throughout the interviews, we found that the amount of time grandparents spent with their grandchildren was pivotal in defining grandparental roles. When grandmothers spent substantial amounts of time with grandchildren (e.g., caring for the child every weekday afternoon), they tended to assume co-parenting roles, taking over responsibilities and an authoritative status. This was further influenced by living arrangements, as multi-generational households lent themselves to grandparental co-parenting. When parents moved into or out of the grandparental home, this influenced the dynamics of parental and grandparental relationships. For example, Stacey noted that disagreements with her mother over Rachel's feeding became more pronounced "[e]specially since we moved out".

While the majority of participants described their mothers as having held primary responsibility for food provision, they did not uniformly celebrate "mom's home cooking." For example, as shown in the stories from Sandra and Stacey, they described their mothers' eating and cooking quite differently. And this is to be expected. As shown in historical studies of cookbooks from the United States, the food-loving homemaker ideal was an ideological construction of the mid-1900s (Inness 2001; Neuhaus 2003), while, in reality, many women disliked and resisted it (cf. Oakley 1974 in the UK). This ideal was reproduced in the interviews as well, as discursively connected to "good" mothering in previous generations, but also, as will be clearer in the next section, as a marker of idealized *parenting* (regardless of gender). Among the participants, describing a mother's cooking negatively was a way to critique her mothering, while describing one's own food competence deprecatingly was a way for some women to belittle their mothering. Some participants qualified critical statements about their mothers' cooking by explaining that their mothers had little time to cook, as they had to work outside the home due to economic necessity. Similar statements about the relationships between mothering, cooking, and labor market participation also appeared when women criticized their own cooking: for these women, who were the primary breadwinners in their households (either as single mothers or as the partners of unemployed men), full-time work and further education were cited as the main reasons for not cooking "adequately."

One example of a mother who talked self-deprecatingly about how she fed her child was Jackie, a single mother to Ethan. Ethan's father was absent from his life, and Jackie struggled as a single working mother, explaining that her ability to provide nutritious meals was hampered by her heavy workload outside the home. Jackie's mother, Thelma, described Jackie's food provision as convenience-based and reliant on processed foods: "[Jackie] never cooks, or not often. For convenience I think they eat pizza here, and corn dogs and that sort of thing." When Jackie herself was asked what she thought she was especially good at as a parent, she answered:

Jackie: Probably providing for him. I've been a single mom the whole time and I just graduated college when I got pregnant with him. So I wasn't, I didn't have a career, I wasn't stable, so I went from minimum wage jobs to corporate, all while he was growing up being by myself. So I provide a stable house for him, and we live in a nice neighborhood, everything's good. I laugh a lot with him and we have a good relationship.

While Jackie said her father also cared about food, she described him as a "health nut," and turned to her mother for the majority of support. During Jackie's childhood as well, her mother was responsible for cooking, despite Jackie's father's purported interest in food. Thelma described herself as a former hippie who "cooked every night, well we went out on Friday nights. . . . We had a wide variety of foods, we didn't eat fast food. Lots of fruits and vegetables and that sort of thing." By contrast, during Jackie's childhood, her dad's involvement in her feeding centered on making comments about her body, something she cited as a trigger for a subsequent eating disorder. Indeed, through narratives about food and feeding, Jackie narrated ongoing conflicts with men in her life, including her father and her former partner. She also described the lingering trauma of abuse and mistreatment that she and close female relatives were subjected to by male relatives. Moreover, Jackie's narrative was not unique: histories of neglect, abuse, relationship disintegration, and familial conflict consistently arose in interviews about children's food, feeding, and healthy eating.

### ***Involved fathers and female role-models***

As hinted in the above section, and as expected given what we know from previous research, generations intersected with the gendering of food and responsibilities for food provision to children. This was perhaps most clearly demonstrated by Stacey, who explicitly contrasted her own cooking with that of her mother's, both past and present. However, a form of "good" fathering connected to assuming feeding responsibilities also emerged among the parent generation. As we demonstrate below, the support and legacy of mothers or other women in the family seems to have been pivotal for the men, with these older women cast as both culinary and parental role models.

Let us start with Mark, who was interviewed about his son, Logan. At the time of the study, Mark struggled with unemployment. His ex-partner, Kimberley, who was also interviewed, described her own childhood as nutritionally inadequate due to her family's poverty and consequent food insecurity. When speaking about Mark, she described him as a good role model who influenced his son in a healthy way:

Kimberley: Mark and Logan make their own hummus, make really great food. Like good-for-you food. He puts me to shame. His dad doesn't let him have any TV or any sugar. So [at] my house you can have macaroni and cheese and hot dogs.

The quote suggests that the “good-for-you food” cooked for a child is a way of doing good parenting, putting Kimberley “to shame.” There was supposedly no sugar and no TV at Mark's place, and this is relationally understood as a contrast to Kimberley's own, nutritionally worse, home, where Logan “can have macaroni and cheese and hot dogs.” Describing herself as a “horrible cook,” exemplified by typically “easy” and quick dishes (Cairns, Johnston, and Baumann 2010; Mellor, Blake, and Crane 2010; Neuman, Gottzén, and Fjellström 2017b; Parsons 2016), Kimberley framed Logan's father as her culinarily skilled counterpart. His hummus making was but one example, but Kimberley's general story was about a single unemployed dad who assumed responsibility for feeding his son and taught him how to cook, at times by making food together (cf. Neuman, Gottzén, and Fjellström 2017a). In Mark's case, time spent with the child and living arrangements also influenced relationships with the grandparents on both sides. As Mark was unemployed, he claimed more responsibility and was proud to be the one in charge of caring for his child. In his interview, he noted many times that he was a better food provider than his child's grandmother (Mark's ex-wife's mother), who previously had been the child's main caregiver. Reflecting these changed dynamics, during the interview with Mark's ex-wife's mother, she repeatedly expressed sadness about losing her caregiving authority.

Mark described his culinary skills as a legacy from his mother (Logan's grandmother), and celebrated his mother's food from a gustatory perspective. Nonetheless, he expressed some level of disagreement with his mother about the nutritional value of the foods she cooked. For example, when asked how he ate as a child, Mark said:

Mark: American cuisine. Roast beef, meatloaf, that kind of stuff. It's kind of funny the things you don't realize until you are older. Now that I'm older and I watch my mom cook compared to how I cook, she cooks with a lot of butter and grease. Her food tastes good, but I never really paid attention when I was a kid. When I grew up, my dad hunts, and I hunt, so we would eat bacon and eggs, pancakes and waffles.

What Mark, like several of the other fathers in the sample, expressed was a view of children's eating that surpassed the notion that “as long as they eat it is good enough” (cf. Owen et al. 2010). Indeed, Mark and other fathers included very careful nutritional considerations in their concepts of healthy feeding. However, Mark's criticism about his mother's cooking was both generational and gendered, describing a “traditional” gendered division of housework, with only his mother responsible for cooking. Paradoxically, then, this made her alone—rather than his father who was claimed not to cook at all—subject to a critical (and unfavorable) generational contrast with Mark's own cooking. Notably, Mark's quote also mentions his dad, whom he described there and elsewhere in his interview as an involved father and grandparent, but in more stereotypically masculine ways, such as working on house maintenance or hunting.

Many participants described men's involvement in children's lives through stereotypically masculine activities such as camping, hunting, fishing, or sports (cf. Gottzén and Kremer-Sadlik 2012). What stood out in these descriptions, however, was the generational juncture with gender, i.e., the differences between fathers and grandfathers, rather than between men and women within the parent generation. This was oftentimes expressed, among the men, as an outcome of their mothers' influence on them. One example was provided by Wayne, who lived with his partner Bell (also interviewed), and talked about his son Seth. The following exchange delineates Wayne's response to a question about his influence on Seth's lifestyle in terms of food and physical activity:

- Wayne: I hope that when he leaves home he knows how to cook, he knows how to cook for himself. I'd be damn embarrassed if he was that kid who didn't know how to cook a can of soup.
- Interviewer: Do you know how to cook?
- Wayne: Yes. I am the one who cooks and cleans in the household. I am the one who does the laundry and dishes and I cook.
- Interviewer: How do you know, I mean who taught you?
- Wayne: I guess I was influenced by my mom. I grow up eating, like the whole slow food thing. I don't know if you're familiar with it.
- Interviewer: Yes, I've heard of it.
- Wayne: Okay. That's how I grew up. I grew up eating homemade bread and most of what we ate was soup because it's cheap. I grew up eating a lot of homemade soup. My stepmom, when I move[d] in with them, my stepmom always cooked. And I just loved food from an early age so I was really into cooking. I have always had an interest in cooking for myself.

Wayne described an interest in food and cooking that was cultivated by his mother and stepmother (both of whom were also interviewed). He also claimed to be the more nutritionally strict parent: "in my worst I'm capable of being a food Nazi or a nutrition Nazi. I wouldn't buy potato chips ever. But Bell loves potato chips so we buy potato chips." Moreover:

Bell is a big snacker—if she goes grocery shopping, we end up with a bunch of snacks ... that's usually where we run into a lot of stuff where I am making dinner and she has snacks but then Seth wants snacks. But Seth is not going to eat his dinner if he snacks.

As demonstrated by this last quote, Wayne considered himself to be the main domestic cook while framing Bell's snacking as a barrier that occasionally undermined the healthier meals he wanted to cook for Seth. While Wayne was not the only man who expressed interest in food and assumed responsibility for food provision, he stood out in expressing strong ideas about gender relations. For example, elsewhere in his interview, Wayne explicitly stated that it was his responsibility as a father to teach his son to be respectful to women. However, Wayne explained that this conviction was inspired not by the fathering he witnessed in his family, but by his respect for his mother, who was his primary role model. In contrast, Wayne's relationship with his father and other men in his family was fraught with complexity, and he described it, at times, as highly problematic.

Our last example is Jason's story. Jason was a single father of two and was interviewed about his son Dennis, who rarely saw his mother. Jason's story did not focus on his cooking, although he did express some concerns about what Dennis ate and drank. Jason's parents divorced when Jason was a child; Jason's father was said to see Dennis "maybe once a year, if that," and Jason himself did not "spen[d] a lot of time with [his father] throughout [his] life." However, Dennis's grandmother—Jason's mother—saw Dennis and his brother on a daily basis and helped Jason when he needed support as a "[f]ull time dad." Jason's story delineated struggles similar to the ones described by the single mothers in the sample: "My role [in Dennis's life] is huge, it's everything," he said, "I mean I am mom and dad, so it's pretty much like that." Like the single mothers in our sample, Jason described relying on his own mother as a "second parent," which included collaborations, but also some slight disagreements, in feeding the family. Jason's mother (i.e., Dennis's grandmother) offered this interpretation of why Jason was more "liberal" (as she put it) about snacking than she was:

I think he doesn't want to say no as much to the kids, maybe I don't know if it has to do with socioeconomic [disadvantages]. He has actually said to me at some point that "my kids eat a lot and they will be able to eat as much as they want to." He doesn't want them to get the feeling that they will ever go hungry or there won't be food available to them. To me I think that's overindulging them, just like a safety, there will always be food for them, they won't go hungry.

Hence, Jason's socioeconomic situation was offered as a possible explanation of why he was less strict about the food he provided his children: given this disadvantage, Jason's mother argued, he did not want his children to feel like there was ever a shortage of food.

While Jason's story exemplified a single father who assumed the lion's share of housework, it is notable that his description of his mother's role in Dennis's life was clearly feminized:

Interviewer: How do you see your mother's role on his life?

Jason: It's pretty big, my kids love [my] mom a lot because they don't have their mom so they see a female figure. So my mom is big to them.

Interviewer: What do you think she is especially good at with your kids?

Jason: Just the motherly, you know, soft and comforting, aware that sometimes I have to punish and be stern, I don't think she has to do that like I do. The hugs and stuff like that, grandma.

Jason cast his mother's supportive role primarily as that of a *woman*, as a "soft and comforting" counterpart to a more disciplinarian father. However, whereas the framing of this particular quote was clearly gendered, it was also generational, alluding to the difference between parental and grandparental roles. Yet in another part of the interview Jason mentioned how punishing Dennis by giving him "time out" was a method he probably learned from his mother. Thus, stereotypes of a disciplinarian man versus a nurturing woman were not a clear-cut dichotomy in the interview as a whole. Instead, gender and generation were negotiated, sometimes with the grandmother as a generic supporter and sometimes as a gendered caregiver of others. Furthermore, in this particular parent-grandmother relationship, food was less subject to negotiation than

in other families. “My mom was always good about preparing all meals, eating as a family and things like that,” Jason said, adding a bit later that his mother learned “from her mom . . . my grandma so down the line they were pretty good cooks.” Again, as in the interview with Mark, Jason—a father who struggled to provide his children with healthy food—attributed much of his parental skills and food knowledge to women of previous generations.

Notably, Jason’s narrative of his mother’s simultaneous role as a grandmother and as a mother figure also reflected the complexity their household structure introduced into their division of caregiving labor. Like other single parents in our sample, Jason had to move back to his family home. This influenced his relationship with his mother, who explained:

Now our current living situation influences it because it doesn’t allow me to be the perfect grandparent because I have to be more of a disciplinarian than when they are not living there. So I think the situation does affect it and I think our relationship is different when we are with Jason than when we are by ourselves. Jason has a different way of parenting maybe than I do. I would like to not, especially when he’s feeling that he’s depending on us for a home and stuff. I don’t want him to feel like I’m imposing on his parenting skill.

Later in the interview, she referred repeatedly to this change in living arrangements, framing her responses with statements like “before they moved. . .” when describing, for example, how grocery shopping was structured in the household. Asked directly by the interviewer to reflect “about her role as a grandma,” she answered:

When he’s not living with me for the most I do the role I have, anything. They bring so much joy. But when we are living together it takes away my privilege to have a really good grandparent relationship because I am put in a parent role and for me I don’t think it’s good for our relationship.

As with the other multi-generational households in our sample, Jason and his mother expressed the tensions that marked caregiving dynamics when, due to socioeconomic disadvantages, grandparents became a constant authoritative presence in their grandchildren’s home lives and the distinction between parental and grandparental roles became increasingly ambiguous. Importantly, this ambiguous relationship is not one between two heterosexual partners, but an extended family relation between a struggling single father and his mother as “second parent.”

## Discussion

This study has demonstrated how gender and generation intersect in interviews about provision of food to children among US parents and grandparents. In the participants’ interviews, feeding emerged as a synecdoche for care, among both mothers and fathers, grandmothers and grandfathers. Our analysis exposed shifts in the definition of gendered “good parenting” and experiences of socioeconomic disadvantages across generations. Participants talked about gender-unequal divisions of foodwork, the burden and meaning of single parenting, absent fathers, unemployment, family conflicts, and economic hardship, but also about love, care, responsibility, family dynamics, and changing gender relations. Throughout, grandmothers emerged or identified themselves

as valuable supporters, sometimes as invaluable step-in parents, and oftentimes as role models for parenting and feeding. Based on this, we conclude with two reflections.

First, our data contribute to the accumulating literature on men, masculinities, and food that has suggested a gendered transition in men's relationship to domestic foodwork and the feeding of children (Neuman 2016; Szabo and Koch 2017). Many fathers in our study considered foodwork as part of their fatherhood responsibilities and some enjoyed cooking, thus confirming studies on food and masculinity cited above. Notably, however, they described their parenting and food responsibilities in ways similar to those of mothers with comparable life situations, suggesting that structural conditions rather than gender framed their food responsibilities. This finding suggests social change in domestic masculinities as related to food, but also reflects a broader phenomenon observed by Hochschild (1989): a less unequal contribution to housework among socioeconomically disadvantaged men, who, despite more conservative values in terms of gender, assumed household responsibilities for strictly pragmatic, rather than ideological, reasons. We do not deny that a similar mechanism may be at play here, i.e., men doing foodwork and feeding their children because their life conditions do not provide them with any other choice. However, given the participants' expressed virtues of responsible fathering and their willing foodwork collaborations with their mothers, we contend that real change is likely to have occurred.

On a discursive level, moreover, food provision to children was constructed, by both men and women, as a *parental* responsibility rather than an exclusively *maternal* one. However, the participants' discussions of feeding still bore markers of gender: feeding was described as the realm of one's mother and grandmother, and cooking was described as learned from and inspired by women ancestors, and thus symbolically associated with feminine nurturance. Furthermore, self-deprecating talk about one's culinary competence as a way to belittle one's parenting was clearer among mothers than among fathers, reflecting women's internalized burdens of "good mothering," as prescribed by social, political, and authoritative health discourses on child feeding (cf. Eli and Lavis 2018). This self-deprecation, moreover, was related to discourses of economic hardship and the burdens of heavy workloads among the women who were primary or sole breadwinners. We therefore conclude that, whereas many studies do indicate that food, at least in domestic settings, is becoming less gender-specific, there is little doubt that gender continues to matter.

Second, the phrase "feeding the family" (DeVault 1991) does not only refer to a book but also to a concept that encapsulates the social dynamics of food, gender, and the organization of care work in everyday life. Based on our findings, we put forward "feeding the extended family" as a theoretical concept that gives credit to the legacy of DeVault (1991) and others in the same tradition, while making it clearer that the provision of food to children is a project often shared and influenced by experiences and values across generations; at times by choice, and at others, by economic necessity. In the US context of the present study, reliance on grandparents for childcare reflects the lack of governmental and other institutional support to mothers (e.g., through free or reduced-cost childcare services). Shaped by political economic forces, this extension of caregiving activities across generations plays out, in the micro-level of the family home, in sometimes conflicted feeding dynamics.

Previous research has indicated that parents often perceive grandparents' attitudes to food and feeding as a barrier to children's healthy eating (Pocock et al. 2010). However, as we have reported in a previous publication focused on the provision of "treats," in families where grandparents assume caregiving responsibilities similar to those of parents (including some of the single-parent families we have discussed here), grandparents have a more authoritative feeding role whereas parents may engage in indulgent feeding (Eli et al. 2016). We argued that parental and grandparental feeding dynamics emerge dialogically, so as to maintain familial homeostasis in feeding and caregiving.

The gendered dynamics of foodwork reported in this paper, wherein grandmothers who were described as "second parents" also endorsed more authoritative ways of feeding, are in line with this finding. Scholars such as Cairns and Johnston (2015), Parsons (2015a, 2015b, 2016) and Julier (2013) have indeed demonstrated how the interaction of gender and socioeconomic position continues to matter to this day. Our findings confirm this, as well as the signs of a more progressive domestic masculinity across the socioeconomic spectrum, and we argue further for a theoretical understanding where inter-generational ways of "doing gender" (West and Zimmerman 1987) are considered in relation to domestic foodwork and the feeding of children.

As such, our main theoretical contribution is that the gendered organization of care work, in which gender is produced through *work*, incorporates not only the role of men but also the gendered work of grandparents and inter-generational dynamics. Without making normative judgments about grandparental involvement, we contend that future research should further explore the gendered dimensions of inter-generational feeding and caregiving. Research on the gendered division of foodwork, and housework in general, is largely confined to a (heterosexual) couple-paradigm, thus losing sight of extended family relations, but our data suggest that attention to the influence of the extended family is highly relevant for this literature. For example, studies of contemporary food provision to children could explore issues such as the increased reliance on grandparental support in times of economic austerity, time-use surveys of housework could include family members other than parents/couples, and analyses of long-term social change could examine ancestral influences that inspire the becomings of involved parents and skilled domestic cooks.

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