# Mothers, Meal Kits and Morals:

# Creating good eaters, being a good mother and reimagining the good daughter in Aotearoa

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# Abstract

The use of meal kits in family foodwork is an increasing phenomenon in Aotearoa and not since supermarketisation has there been such a significant change to the food provisioning system. As a popular food procurement option, meal kits inevitably interact with the enduring entanglement of mothers and family foodwork. I use this significant change in how families are fed to explore the everyday work done by mothers as they navigate the moral meanings of being a good mother and a good daughter.

Drawing on extensive autoethnographic practice, coupled with participant observation and co-constructed interviews with five other mothers, I use thematic analysis that positions the everyday experiences of women as integral to understanding the moral work done by mothers when using meal kits to feed their families. This research asks the previously unexplored question of how morally informed ideas of goodness affect the way mothers incorporate meal kits into their everyday foodwork.

The importance of the intersubjective identities of mother and daughter, the need to provide competent care to children, and the contradictions present in what being a good mother means, in the context of women's own lives and wider Western society, are highlighted in my research. I argue that the intersection of the new phenomenon of meal kits with the perennially intertwined morass of motherhood, morals and foodwork is a space where the continuation of gendered foodwork, the resistance to and reproduction of good mothering ideology and the transmission of moral practices across generations is found.

# Acknowledgements

Firstly, I would like to thank the women who invited me into their homes and gifted me their time talking to me. It is every researcher's fear that no one will want to talk to them. My request for participants would have reached hundreds of women, so I cannot overemphasize how appreciative I am of the five women who agreed to be part of the research. I also give my thanks to your friendship throughout the years and the fact that although it may have been years since we saw each other, it was a pleasure to reconnect. I am so thankful that you decided to trust me enough to share your stories with me, this thesis would not exist without your input.

To my family, thank you for putting up with my research encroaching on your lives. Thank you for letting me use your words and our experiences as we ate our way through three years of meal kits. To my children, I have finished now, so you get your mum back. To my husband, thank you for being my research assistant and for listening to all my half-baked discoveries. Thank you for your unwavering belief in my abilities, and for joining me in questioning how we each engage with foodwork even when it was uncomfortable. Your support has allowed me to do this.

A huge thank you to my supervisors Dr Carolyn Morris and Dr Robyn Andrews, who have been enthusiastic about my research since day one. Before we were allocated our supervisors, the two of you were exactly who I was hoping to get, and I feel extremely fortunate to have had my wish granted. Carolyn, thank you for giving me opportunities to hone my skills as a teacher as well as an anthropologist, and for your clear-sighted prompts and suggestions. Robyn, you have been so instrumental in me believing that my writing is worth reading, thank you for all your kind words. Most of all it is the kindness I was shown by both of you that I will remember. As Robyn said way back at the beginning – I can't believe we manged to chat about Food Bag for three years and call it work!

**Dedication**

I dedicate my thesis to my late mother Cathryn Newey. Mum, this is my way of making all the invisible work you did a bit more visible.

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# Chapter One

# Introduction

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It was the coupon that finally wore me down. Until then I had resisted, reasoning that it was cheaper for me to do the weekly shop. I had the time to frequent the local fruit and veg market and scour the discounted meat section in Pak'nSave. Besides, I knew that my children would never eat it. Meal kits were not for me. But as I sat in my friend's kitchen listening to her extol the virtues of using meal kits and brandishing a recipe binder in front of me, I wavered. When she offered to give me a coupon for 50% off my first order, I found I was too curious to refuse. My inability to pass up a bargain unwittingly led me towards a tumultuous relationship with meal kits.

This thesis, in part, is driven by my desire to understand why I have felt so many conflicting emotions about using meal kits. I wanted to explore why having boxes of food delivered to my house affected me much more deeply than any trip to the supermarket. After cooking my first meal (a Japanese-inspired savoury omelette), I vividly recall thinking that meal kits were about so much more than food. Using meal kits allowed me to surrender a weight I was unaware I was labouring under every time I had to make dinner. My initial feeling was one of utter relief.

But this feeling, however euphoric, was not enough to make me a regular user, meal kits were still expensive, and my kids still would not consistently eat the meals. For me, it was impossible to justify using meal kits regularly. But the more I pondered and the more I dabbled in using meal kits, the more I was convinced that meal kits were an important turning point in what it means to feed our families. My ruminations were interrupted by another turning point, the lockdowns associated with COVID-19 in 2020. This was when I became a "heavy user" of meal kits, purchasing them for five meals every week. Using meal kits

[1] The photographic bands at the beginning and end of each chapter depict the 42 meal kit deliveries I received during the year I was of recording my autoethnographic food journal. Each photograph is of a separate food box delivery and the images are in chronological order from March 2021 until March 2022.

during lockdown meant I knew my family would be fed and eased the pressure on me having to brave the supermarket.

What is telling is that it took a global pandemic for me to deem using meal kits consistently as acceptable. I loved using meal kits, but I could not justify using them because it only really made my life easier, and mothers are not enculturated to place their own needs above those of the family. Using meal kits felt indulgent and wasteful and diminished the value I had placed on my ability to provide food for my family. Meal kits were a place of conflict for me where relief, enjoyment and guilt co-existed. Meal kits were something that I enjoyed using but also something that challenged my subject position as a good mother.

I started to investigate meal kits using autoethnographic practice, which began to untangle some of my conflicts and allowed me to understand the importance of paying close attention to the everyday. I have since been joined in my journey by five other women whom I met through my connection with Playcentre Aotearoa. These women like me, identify as Pākehā middle-class mothers, and they graciously took the time to talk with me about how they use meal kits to feed their families. I was also welcomed into their homes as they cooked dinner, to carry out participant observation. As I knitted together my own experiences using extensive autoethnography with those of my participants, the meanings surrounding meal kits that began to emerge were much more important than just the spices sprinkled on your chicken.

The advent of meal kits represents a significant change to practices of procurement and therefore how we eat, and I am using this change to explore the challenges of maintaining or questioning the moral meanings of being a good mother (Mintz & Du Bois, 2002). Anthropologist Sidney Mintz suggests that when confronted with a dietary change:

> Individuals, families and social groups must busily integrate what are newly acquired behaviours into daily or weekly practice, thereby turning the unfamiliar into the familiar, imparting additional meaning to the material world, and employing and creating significance at the most humble level (1995, p.5).

My thesis is situated at the most humble level, the everyday level of mothers providing sustenance for their children. How mothers work to make the unfamiliar familiar illuminates the interaction between the three things that anthropologist Arthur Kleinman (2006, p.227) suggests alter our moral lives, the “cultural meanings, social experience, and subjectivity (inner emotions and sense of self)”. Looking at the constant work of feeding families shows

that woven through the everyday are echoes of wider cultural meanings and social experiences. I ask the previously unexplored question of how morally informed ideas of goodness affect the way mothers incorporate meal kits into their everyday foodwork. As women work to make the unfamiliar familiar in their own lives their actions also indicate the continuity of gendered foodwork in and through change, the resistance to and reproduction of good mothering ideology and the transmission of moral practices across generations.

## Meal kits and the Family Meal

Meal kits originated in Sweden with the business idea being to deliver fresh groceries and recipes to customers' homes and thus save time on shopping and provide healthy dinners (UNCTAD, 2011). Various iterations of this scheme have spread over the Western world. Meal kit company My Food Bag first entered the market in Aotearoa in 2013 with a staff of five and has now grown to become the third-biggest food retailer in Aotearoa (Henderson, 2018). This opened the door for numerous other meal kit companies to begin operations in Aotearoa. All meal kits operate on a similar system where customers can choose the number of meals each week and the number of people they want to cater for. Specific meals are selected from a weekly menu and a box containing fresh vegetables, proteins, sauces, and spices is delivered to the door. Customers are expected to have basic pantry items such as oil, stock, sugar, salt and pepper to complete the recipe as well as kitchen implements, but everything else is provided in specific portion sizes. There is no obligation to have a box delivered every week and customers can skip deliveries or opt-out of the scheme at any time with no penalties.

The rapid expansion of meal kits into the market suggests that there has been a significant change to the foodscape in Aotearoa. My Food Bag, a fast-expanding service with over 57,000 active members, has delivered 22 million meals since 2014 (My Food Bag Group, 2023). Global meal kit company Hello Fresh launched in Aotearoa in 2018 and in 2020 opened a new distribution centre which would increase production by at least 10-fold (Scully, 2020), indicating an increasing adoption by people of the food provisioning system. My Food Bag and HelloFresh are the main players in Aotearoa's meal kit market, although there also are smaller companies such as Woop, Fed and Yum Jar available. Meal kits have found a favourable market in Aotearoa with the country having the highest adoption per capita of meal kits in the world (Statista, 2023).

However, although using meal kits changes the mode of food procurement for households, the meals still need to be cooked, and they are designed to be eaten all at once in one sitting. The format of meal kits is designed to enable families to continue to produce home-cooked meals, and thus, the use of meal kits reproduces rather than threatens what Wilk (2010) describes as the hegemonic goodness of the family dinner. Family meals have been established as sites of goodness and are the supposed remedy to many family ills (Lindsay et al, 2021; Kinser, 2017; Jones et al, 2014). These family dinners are a form of social reproduction at the micro-level that teaches family members behaviours and preferences that will then be practised in the wider societal context (Persson Osowski & Mattsson Sydner, 2019; Thompson et al., 2016). Meal kits enable this site of reproduction to endure.

Moreover, the hegemonic goodness of family meals in the West has always been deeply entangled with moral notions of being a good mother (Kinser, 2017). Being a good mother, not only means providing good food but also working to facilitate family dinners (Kinser, 2017; DeVault, 1991). This entanglement of the goodness of family meals and mothers has seeped into meal kit use in Aotearoa. The most prominent example can be seen in how My Food Bag uses founding member and face of My Food Bag Nadia Lim's identity as a mother to infer the goodness of their product:

> A Mum herself, Nadia's our champion, fighting the good food fight, together with the greater My Food Bag family of growers, chefs, suppliers and our very own team.
>
> (https://help.myfoodbag.co.nz/hc/en-nz/articles/360009575633-Families-Make-Dinner-Dinner-Makes-Families-)

Lim's background as a clinical dietitian also cements her credentials to imbue goodness into the My Food Bag brand. It seems My Food Bag was aware of the moral miasma swirling around dinner time and wished to capitalise on the connection between good mothers and good food. But even with the assistance of meal kits, family meals do not just happen, they take a great deal of work. As such, it is important to understand what foodwork entails.

## Foodwork

DeVault (1991, p.55) hinted at what foodwork was when she spoke of "doing a meal" requiring much more than cooking. She identified the invisibility of the labour that gets dinner on the table. A more expansive definition of foodwork, drawing on the work of MacKendrick & Pristavec (2019), Szabo (2011) and Beagan et al (2008), situates foodwork

as entailing the mental, emotional, and physical labour involved in feeding a family. This work includes practical activities such as shopping, growing food, cooking, cleaning and dealing with food waste as well as thought work involved in planning meals and the emotional work of facilitating mealtime rituals and looking after the emotional well-being of family members via food preferences.

DeVault stated that "in virtually all societies women are responsible for most childcare and cooking" (1991, p.13). As much as we may wish this to be otherwise, women are still doing the majority of the foodwork in families (Cassidy & Pasche, 2016; O'Connell, & Brannen, 2016; Began et al, 2008) and food and femininity remain inextricably linked (Cairns & Johnston, 2015; Lupton, 1996; DeVault, 1991). Men may play a role in foodwork, but they are mostly supporters, not initiators of efforts to use food to care for and parent children (Cairns, Johnston, & Baumann, 2015)**.** In light of this, it may seem obvious that when looking at foodwork and motherhood that gender inequality is an important factor. However, it took me some time to realise the importance of the gender order in my study. Below I outline why and borrow concepts from Moore's *A Passion for Difference* (1994) and Bourdieu's *Masculine Domination* (2001) to make sense of how I was able to ignore the gendered practices and discourses which enable the reproduction of gender inequality within foodwork.

**Infinitesimal and Almost Invisible – Gender Inequality and Motherhood.**

Two years after I had started my project, in the midst of writing up my findings, I was explaining all the ways in which my participants and I would prioritise our children's food preferences over our own. Wary of how this made us appear, akin to the wives of older generations who subordinated their preferences in favour of their husbands, I hastily added an emolliating sentence:

> I am not suggesting that we[mothers] are subordinate, but I think using meal kits is an avenue in which we can get our own food needs met.

The comment I received from my supervisor was concise and confronting:

> Why not? Everything you write suggests that you are! And that you subordinate yourselves! Why are you unwilling to go there?

Indeed, why was I unwilling to go there? I had not shied away from exploring how being middle-class and Pākehā tied us closer to dominant discourses of what being a good mother entails, but I was studiously ignoring how our gender did the same.

As impossible as it seems I had forgotten that mothers are also women, and as such gender is an important part of being a mother. Interestingly I was not the only one to gloss over this detail: the women I talked to all spoke of the difficulties associated with being a mother, but never connected this to being a woman. For us, discourses around motherhood had superseded those of being a woman (Moore, 1994). Moore claims that "Women continually find themselves being defined by the label "mother", and it is this label which then defines their relation to work, to social relations, to sexuality and even to life" (Moore, 1994, p.99), making it unsurprising that the identity of mother overrides that of woman.

Furthermore, the discourses of gender inequality I was familiar with (mostly involving binary oppression) appeared so far from my personal experience that there seemed no reason to challenge my comfortable life with uncomfortable ideas (Moore, 1994). I did not feel unequal, subordinate, or oppressed, so I decided that I was not. But the idea niggled away at me and once I connected mothering with perpetuating the gender order, I began to feel very foolish indeed. The more I thought about how my own decisions were leading me to endure and reproduce gender inequality, in the form of the self-sacrificing mother (Hays, 1996), the more foolish I felt. How embarrassing that I had chosen to subordinate myself, and subsequently, how ridiculous I felt claiming I suffered when there are bigger injustices in the world. After all, my life is extremely comfortable, and trying to find areas of oppression within such privilege felt almost perverse. Because the reality of being a mother responsible for family foodwork is not that bad, it is bearable, it is manageable, and because I was fortunate enough to be able to choose to be a stay-at-home mother, doing all the foodwork can at times even feel justified.

In Bourdieu's words I was experiencing subordination that was "infinitesimal and almost invisible" (2001, p.108). However, even if this subordination is bearable, it is still unequal and helps to reproduce a gender order that in turn feeds into the good mother rhetoric, which can exacerbate frustration and feelings of inadequacy. It would be remiss of me not to include these ideas as an integral part of understanding motherhood, no matter how unappealing the infinitesimal, subtle, sometimes chosen subordination of middle-class mothers is as a topic to me. While I am not explicitly using feminist theory in my analysis, it does lurk around the edges of my project, and I am choosing to lean into the idea that "in some ways, feminist theory needs to offend to get in the way because feminism needs to be everywhere"(Mackinlay, 2022, p.331), even in the finely grained actions of the everyday. Despite this, I am cautious of applying potentially offensive ideas to my participant's lives.

However, as Moore (1994 p.53) states, "…no one can ever be fully aware of the conditions of their own constructions" and I must balance the desire not to offend my participants with my job as an anthropologist to make connections that may not be openly acknowledged between the lives of mothers and larger social processes.

Part of the difficulty in perceiving inequalities associated with socially constructed categories such as mother, is that these categories "…are at their most powerful when they appear most natural, most transparent, most taken for granted" (Moore, 1994, p.99). Mothers being responsible for foodwork within families can feel natural, especially when viewed in conjunction with the female biological ability to feed children in utero (Lupton, 1996; DeVault, 1991). However, wider social processes such as the structure of the labour market contribute to women's greater involvement in foodwork and care by making both full-time work and motherhood difficult to participate in simultaneously (Cairns, Johnston, & Baumann, 2015; Bourdieu, 2001). The interplay of mother, gender and food is incredibly complicated and exists in numerous forms within the three levels of our moral life outlined by Kleinman (2006).

Bourdieu (2001) offers the concept of permanence in and through change for understanding the continuation of gender inequality, albeit in different forms, throughout the passage of time, and through the levels of our moral lives. Despite changing environments and changing practices, such as using meal kits, the gendering of foodwork persists. Moreover, while everyday practice has the ability to change dominant discourse "through processes of interpretation and reinterpretation" (Moore, 1994, p. 83), the choosing of gender positions does also occur through everyday practice and below the level of consciousness (Bourdieu, 2001; Moore, 1994) reflecting the contradictory and competing ways in which we can both reproduce and resist gender inequality. Bourdieu's earlier concept of habitus, which he describes as "systems of durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures" (1990, p.5), is also useful in understanding how we often unconsciously reproduce gendered practices. Our gender identity, and thus how to be a good mother and daughter, is inculcated from birth and forms part of our primary and most enduring habitus (Power, 1999), which then structures how we interact with and make sense of the world. What is vitally important to explore within this contradictory space of permanence and change is how the practice of the everyday helps to make sense of the ways mothers integrate meal kits into their lives, and how this connects to larger social processes, as well as lived experiences.

## The Importance of the Everyday

I turn to the work of Veena Das, and her focus on the everyday as an important site of moral decision-making and a place where the shape of our lives are remade and reimagined. With a focus on the everyday and attention to micro-level detail Das (2015) aims to remove the air of obviousness that has previously permeated the everyday within anthropological writing. I intend to use my "…exceedingly extended acquaintances with extremely small matters" (Geertz, 1973, p. 21) to propel my analytic impulse towards a descent into the ordinary, rather than an escape from it (Das, 2007) towards the abstraction of grand theory. I rely on using thick description which includes "very densely textured facts" and engaging with "complex specifics" (Geertz, 1973, p.28) to rescue the nuance of the everyday (Gibson-Graham, 2014). By using as Gibson-Graham (2014, p. S147) puts it "thick description and weak theory" I can delve into the intricacies of the everyday without simply confirming what we already know (Gibson-Graham, 2014) and thus avoid using lived experiences merely as examples to prove a theory. Instead, I allow the everyday experiences of mothers to be instrumental in shaping their own interpretation.

Das champions the "labour of making the ordinary appear" (Das, 2014, p.304) and considers that the "attentiveness to minute shifts in actions and dispositions is one way in which to inhabit the everyday" (Das, 2020, p.170). In my analysis, I pay special attention to how mothers all vary in essentially doing the same thing every day. I conceive of the everyday ordinary decisions and actions involved in foodwork with meal kits as a "space of ethical action" (Das, 2014, p.295), a space where goodness and morality shape what mothers do and how they feel. Das highlights that "moral concepts do not have sharp boundaries" (2015, p.114), and each participant, including myself, embodies ethical sensibilities within our everyday decisions, that are not necessarily explicitly articulated with words of goodness and morality (Das, 2015).

When constructing my analysis, I have let the words of the women lead my descent into the ordinary, following a path that was laid by everyday experiences. However, it is important to remember that I have had some choice "...as to what threads of interpretation to pull on in the making of a story about 'large issues'" (Gibson-Graham, 2014, p. S151). I have chosen to employ the word 'good' heavily in my work, but I am not merely "tracing moral vocabularies" (Das, 2014, p.65), I am exploring how amorphous moral concepts are given

life through our day-to-day decisions and how our relationships as mothers shape how we perceive and enact or resist ideas of goodness.

## Moral Care

As Das highlights, ideas of goodness are connected to moral actions. Joan Tronto's work on care and morality in *Moral boundaries: A political argument for an ethic of care* (1993) suggests that to maintain a moral life one must meet the demands of care that are present in your life. As a mother this applies primarily to the needs of young children, and the most vital need is that of being fed. However, meeting care demands is complicated, and even when looking at feeding as care, more is involved in practising moral care than simply providing food. Tronto developed five elements of an ethic of care to help clarify the complexity required in offering moral care; attentiveness, responsibility, competence, responsiveness and integrity of care.

> These qualities spring from the fact that the ethic of care is a practice, rather than a set of rules or principles. As a result, care's moral qualities will take a more ambiguous form than a list of carefully designed moral precepts. The practice of an ethic of care is complex. (Tronto, 1993, p.126)

Tronto points to the ambiguousness of integrating moral considerations into how one cares, thus, to provide competent care the carer needs to have a nuanced understanding of the situation, the needs of themselves and others and the competencies of the people within the caring relationship (Tronto, 1993). I position feeding as care, and to ascertain how to provide competent care, there needs to be an understanding of the context that mothers are caring and feeding within. Therefore, good mothers provide good care, which is moral care.

## Intersubjective Goodness

Early on in my research I was warned that using the word good in my research question may come across as too judgemental, too moralising and scare off possible participants. What I have come to realise is that 1) Most of my participants were not interested in the nuanced wording of my research question and 2) Thinking that mothers can avoid feeling judged or avoid moralising their actions is impossible. So, I have embraced the word, good.

However, I am not adhering to an objective moral good that exists in the ether, instead, I rely on my inner voice and the voices of the other mothers to reveal how their perception of good interacts with wider cultural constructions of goodness. How we use meal kits highlights the moral work done by mothers as we navigate relational identities as mothers and daughters and try to provide competent care whilst facing the contradictions of what being a good mother can mean. How we integrate meal kits into our existing world speaks to what matters most to us. How we understand and feel about using meal kits illuminates discrepancies in our actions versus our perception of a good mother. This work is not only about striving to be good but also about what goodness means to each individual and how the ideas of good change or endure throughout generations.

Whatever, goodness may mean to us, we cannot be good mothers or good daughters alone because these identities are intersubjective positions. The reality of maintaining mother-child relationships and wider kinship ties is a constant flux of intersubjective negotiation, where we are always in a state of becoming good, rather than a fixed state of being good (Jackson, 2017). Maintaining these relationships, with children and parents, is integral to how mothers feel about and carry out the work of using meal kits to feed their families. However the reality of maintaining these relationships aligns more with Jackson's (2017) description of kinship as a site of deep ambivalence rather than the hyper-symbolisation of the mother being the representation of home, family and wholesome goodness (Hochschild, 2004).

Our endeavours to be good are complicated by the intersubjective aspect of our identity determining what positions we can take up (Moore, 1994). A good mother requires the presence of a good child, which in the context of meal kits, means a good eater. However, while our children need to be physically present to eat, being a good daughter only requires a relationship with a parent. This relationship does not require the physical presence of a parent and can have existed in the past as well as the present. Women need to be good mothers in order to be good daughters. Being able to competently meet the care needs of children shows that mothers have been raised well themselves. Good mothering and good daughterhood can be linked through everyday actions of feeding that demonstrate how family morals are reproduced or rejected as mothers attempt to create good children who are good eaters.

## Chapter Overview

### Literature

A review of the literature directly follows this introduction and pulls together the threads of foodwork, gender, meal kits and goodness. My analysis of the literature on meal kits identifies a lack of anthropological research on the use of meal kits and morals. I also review the research around foodwork and motherhood focusing on what being a good mother, good daughter and good eater means in a white middle-class context. A brief history of mothering in Aotearoa provides a connection point for the majority of research which has been carried out in other colonial settler states.

### Methods and Methodology

Following the literature review, in Chapter Three I outline the methods and methodology I used to generate this research. I used extensive autoethnographic practice, coupled with participant observation and co-constructed interviews with five other mothers. I used thematic analysis on my autoethnographic food journal and participant transcripts that positions the everyday experiences of women as integral to understanding the moral work done by mothers when using meal kits to feed their families. This chapter also addresses the subtle ethical issues that come from working within my own cultural milieu, by positioning myself alongside my participants.

### Good Eaters, Good Mothers and Good Daughters

I have organised my ethnographic chapters to correspond with ideas about good eaters, good mothers and good daughters. These categories act as anchors around which I have clustered everyday actions that are underlined by ordinary ethics and encompass the blurry moral boundaries within which we live our lives.

In Chapter Four, *Good Eaters - Guilt and Gastronomy in a Box,* the concept of good eaters focuses on how, as mothers, we seek to create good eaters and hence good children. I explore how mothers navigate their positions whilst dealing with the thwarting behaviour of children who refuse to be good eaters which results "in a crisis, real or imagined, of self-representation and/or social evaluation" (Moore, 1994, p.66) for the mother. This manifests in the ways in which mothers talk about themselves using meal kits being affected by what their children will eat.

In Chapter Five, *Good Mothers and Good Meals – Competent Care and Care of Self,* I address being a good mother and using meal kits through the concept of care, specifically

providing competent care to children whilst also enabling care of self. The new food provisioning system of meal kits enables the continuity of gendered foodwork, reflecting a permeance to gendered foodwork, despite there being a significant change to how foodwork is done. Mothers can competently care for their children, whilst also challenging the ideas connected with intensive, self-sacrificing mothering (Hays, 1996), by engaging in numerous kinds of self-care.

Lastly, in Chapter Six, *Mothers as Good Daughters – Navigating Learnt Feeding Behaviours in a Contemporary Foodscape,* I delve into how we maintain an intersubjective identity as good daughters when using meal kits. Because using meal kits is a significant departure from how we were fed as children, being a good daughter connects to being a good mother, in how practices our parents used to create good children are maintained, replicated or dismissed when feeding our families. I found that within our use of meal kits, each woman had constructed her own version of being a good daughter which was driven in part by their habitus. The heart of these practices was centred around how our changing everyday practices when using meal kits, incorporated learnt family morals in new and unexpected ways.

## Chapter Two

# Literature Review


The literature about motherhood and foodwork is prolific, the literature about meal kits is much less so. In this review, I bring together an overview of the studies that have been done on meal kits with a selection of the writings on motherhood and foodwork which are pertinent to my themes. What I am interested in is the previously unexplored intersection between how morally informed ideas of goodness affect the way mothers incorporate meal kits into their everyday foodwork and the ability of meal kits to reshape motherhood.

What the literature shows is that women are still responsible for the majority of invisible labour and foodwork within families and that the moral connection between care and good mothers is particularly prominent in foodwork. Research is scarce on meal kits despite their increasing popularity which leaves an opening to explore how care, morals and the relational identities of motherhood and daughterhood intertwine in the context of a new mode of food provisioning. I intend to contribute to the literature on foodwork and mothering by considering the intersection of meal kits and good mother discourses. My work creates an anthropological understanding of how integrating this new provisioning system into feeding families is deeply connected to moral lives and intersubjective identities.

### Meal Kits

Meal kits are changing how families are fed. Essentially meal kits are a new form of technology a labour-saving device which focuses on diminishing what Hochschild and Machung (1989) would call invisible work, as well as physical labour. Since their introduction into the market, meal kits have steadily increased in popularity. This increase in popularity has also spurred increased academic interest. However, the research that does exist on meal kits is sparse and spread over a wide range of concerns, from environmental impact, marketing, business and cultural appropriation. As yet there has been little work that addresses the incorporation of meal kits into family life, let alone how they affect ideas of goodness, identity and gender reproduction.

Early studies of meal kits tended to focus on the reasons meal kits were gaining in popularity. Hertz and Halkier (2017) found that meal kits were used as a deliberate way to break the family dinner routine whilst offering relief from thought work for those who cook. A South African study (Sharnock, 2018) on consumer behaviour found that the make-it-yourself concept of meal kits was one of the main advantages. This echoes the preliminary findings of American anthropologist Amy Trubek (2018), who claimed a major motivation for using meal kits was that people were still able to cook for themselves, setting meal kits apart from the morally contentious ready meals or convenience food.

Pertinent to my work, Hertz & Halkier, (2017, p.232) found in a Danish study that utilising meal kits is a way for "…consumers to avoid the negative moralization associated with other kinds of convenience foods", hinting at the intermingling of morals and food. However, this was focused on the moral comparison of convenient food (e.g. meal kits) versus convenience food (e.g. takeaways), and not wider moral concerns of good mothering. Subsequently, sociologist Halkier (2021) has investigated how using meal kits produced a new hybridisation of how we understand cooking which bridges the gap between convenience and homemade.

Closer to home in Australia came a study (Fraser et al., 2022, p.7) that "To the authors' knowledge, [was] the first study to explore parent's perceptions of the role of meal kits in the family setting". While this did explore the perceptions that primary feeders (mostly mothers) had of meal kits on family health and well-being, the research was limited to Zoom interviews and again heavily focused on the reason for using meal kits, not exploring how they were integrated into family life. Aligning with my research was that the participants in that study were well-educated and financially secure and that it was mothers who benefited the most from using meal kits.

Tellingly there are numerous Australian studies (McKay, 2023; Moores et al., 2021; Gibson & Partridge, 2019) which focus on the nutritional content of meal kits, investigating the claims that these kits produce healthy meals. The focus on trying to ascertain the "goodness" of meal kits in terms of nutrition, highlights how food is often moralised based on its nutritional value which is separated from the complex lived experiences of feeding a family. This focus on nutrition as the ultimate marker of goodness is also seen in the convenient versus convenience food's negative moralisation.

The few studies carried out in Aotearoa focus on the role meal kits can play in the alleviation of food insecurity (Utter et al., 2019; Utter & Denny, 2016). These studies found using meal

kits assisted in improving family meals in terms of nutrition and offering a pathway for adolescents to develop cooking skills. More recently, an article using data from the COVID Kai Survey (Egli et al., 2022) indicated there was increased use of meal kits during the COVID-19 lockdown in Aotearoa especially in households with children. Cooking and eating meals at home became more important during this time, indicating that there would have been an increase in cooking together using meal kits, something that is consistent with my findings.

Looking at the research available on meal kits, a picture begins to emerge of why people use meal kits, how they are being used and the benefits offered by using meal kits. The importance of providing nutritious food is seen as morally paramount. What is missing in the literature is a sound understanding of how this change in foodwork challenges and changes the established moral obligations associated with caring for children and how mothers navigate integrating this new system of food provision into family life.

## Motherhood and Foodwork

The 1980s and 1990s were a time when there was an increased academic focus on motherhood and domestic labour. The work was led by sociologists (e.g. Lupton, 1996; Hays 1996; DeVault, 1991; Hochschild & Machung, 1989) and explored amongst other things intensive motherhood, gendered labour, emotional labour, family foodwork, and invisible work. While these issues still affect the day-to-day lives of women, the study of the division of labour and invisible work seems to have waned. The more recent writing that does address these issues is still quoting work done decades before, (e.g., Oleschuk, 2020; Boni, 2019; MacKendrick & Pristavec, 2019; Persson Osowski & Mattsson Sydner, 2019; Woolhouse, Day& Rickett, 2019; Kinser, 2017; Trubek, 2017; O'Connell, & Brannen, 2016; Cairns & Johnson, 2015). While subsequent studies have added important nuances to the main points made in seminal texts their key ideas are not challenged.

Food anthropologist Carole Counihan highlights a stronger connection between food and identity for mothers than is experienced by the majority of men, and hence fathers, stating "The predominant role of women in feeding is a cultural universal, a major component of female identity, and an important source of female connection to and influence over others" (Counihan,1999, p.46). While there is change in the position of men within foodwork (Meah, 2017), and the participation by men in foodwork is increasing, equality in domestic labour is

not yet a reality, and food and femininity remain inextricably linked (Cairns & Johnston, 2015; Lupton, 1996; DeVault, 1991).

Furthermore, just as I had found in my own experience, the literature shows that the connection between foodwork and gender can feel uncomfortable for women to acknowledge, because of the inequality and subordination associated with domestic work and care (Tronto, 1993). Beagan et al, (2008) found that Euro-Canadian women, would not directly connect their gender to unequal foodwork, instead pivoting and claiming that they did more because they were concerned with family health. When interviewing self-professed foodies, Cairns, Johnston, & Baumann (2015, p.189) found that "women were much more likely to take on the "guardian of health" role than their male partners". This not only highlights a subtle disconnect between gender and unequal foodwork but also speaks to the moral responsibility women associate with feeding work.

## Mothering in Aotearoa

The historical literature on mothering in Aotearoa shows how mothers have constantly worked to provide competent moral care for children and also points to how women's sense of self is affected by identifying as a carer. In her book *Inside Stories: A History of the New Zealand Housewife* (2011) Frances Walsh traces the story of New Zealand mothers from the late 19th century until 1975 when she claims "…feminism had dug in deep and housewives had lost faith in the job" (Walsh, 2011, p.14). While this work concentrates on housewives, and not specifically mothers, pre-1975 the two identities were commonly interchangeable. Some pertinent points in Walsh's work showed that mothers today are still struggling with the same issues around feeding care work as prior generations. Scattered through the book were examples of mothers being concerned with the nutritional value of food, sacrificing their own food needs for those of their children and even questioning the validity of their role as a housewife and feeder.

Works such as the Social Development Council of New Zealand report titled *Housework and Caring Work: Can Men Do Better?* (1977) signalled a thirst for change in how care and feeding work were divided by gender. However, although the increase in feminist rhetoric was instigating change in care work, continuity in aspects of gendered care remained as explored in *Ladies a Plate: Change and Continuity in the Lives of New Zealand Women* (Park, 1991). In this volume, Herda (1991, p.172) found that "this cultural construction of woman as nurturer and food provider is internalised by most women, many of whom seek to

define their lives in terms of it". Smith (1991, p.95) added that "Women saw themselves maintaining traditional values as caring responsible members of society, often presenting this as a biological imperative". So, while mothers were clinging to an identity immersed in providing care, they also expressed frustration at work being synonymous with paid work and the lack of recognition for the labour done by mothers. This, Smith commented, manifested in the women she interviewed often making negative or defensive comments about their position as a housewife (Smith, 1991).

The literature shows a long history of mothers in Aotearoa existing in a complex position where their identity is deeply connected to caring, which requires extensive moral considerations and investment, but also which is not recognised equally with paid work done outside of the home, and hence negatively affects some women's sense of self.

## Middle-class Pākehā Mothers and Goodness

Along with the entanglement of gender and care, what is considered good, ethical and moral mothering is heavily influenced by class positioning and ethnicity (Perrier, 2013; Tronto, 1993). There has been an acknowledgement of the problems associated with middle-class white mothering being viewed as the dominant ideology for "good" mothering despite many mothers not fitting within this category (Cairns, Johnston, & Oleschuk, 2019; Woolhouse, Day & Rickett, 2019; Brenton, 2017; Kaplan, 2000; Hays, 1996). While I acknowledge the problems of this dominance, for my study, using these ideas is appropriate because the women involved do identify as middle-class Pākehā. Furthermore, although I was unable to find much recent Aotearoa-specific literature on Pākehā middle-class mothers and foodwork, much of the literature from similarly colonised neoliberal settler-states regarding the white middle-class mother can offer relevant insights into the Aotearoa context.

## Good Mothers make Good Food

Fielding-Singh & Oleschuk's (2023) overview of the sociological scholarship on foodwork states that a core finding is that good mothering meaning good feeding is still the normative discourse in many Western societies. Because of the visibility and embodiedness of feeding it has become an obvious site of surveillance and scrutiny where mothers are judged (Cassidy & Pasche Guignard, 2016; Cook, 2009). Aotearoa-based research by Lamdin Hunter & Dey (2016) finds that the public discourses that families are exposed to convey that mothers

should choose food that is environmentally responsible, cost-effective, and healthy. Furthermore, good mothers should purchase, prepare, cook and serve this kind of food, with added moral points if the food is local, organic, free-range and ethically sourced. MacKendrick & Pristavec (2019) also found that health professionals and media sources reproduce such discourses with claims that for parents to be "good" they must give healthy, nutritious food to their children. Today the responsibility for feeding a family well has been delegated to the individual, and mothers are led to believe if only they made the right choices and put in enough effort families would be fed economically, ethically and nutritiously (Lamdin Hunter & Dey, 2016; Bowen et al., 2014; Wilk, 2010).

This link between good mothering and good feeding, coupled with the bombardment of good foodwork discourse, leads to women being hyper-aware of the cultural expectations of being a good mother via feeding and therefore continually calibrating their actions in response to often-contradictory demands (Cairns, Johnston & Oleschuk, 2019; Lamdin Hunter & Dey, 2016). Brenton (2017) extended the work of Hays into feeding by using the concept of intensive feeding ideology to explain a gold standard of feeding work that many mothers measured their own actions against. Furthermore, even if mothers are not consciously striving to meet the good mother expectation, it is still present in the context they live in and often carried as an internalised ideal that can clash with the actual lived experience of feeding a family (Skott-Myhre, Weima, & Gibbs, 2012).

## Good Children are Good Eaters

Being a mother is a relational identity, and therefore cannot be achieved alone (Cook, 2009). Being a good mother requires there to be the existence of a good child, and in the context of feeding, a good child is a good eater. Eating, in this context is akin to care receiving which is an important part of mothers providing competent care (Tronto, 1993). However, between mother and children, a divergence often exists in what is perceived as good care, which can be a site of friction (Tronto, 1993), and prevent mothers from experiencing themselves as good.

Family meals become sites of power imbalances and struggles (Wilk, 2010), where members of the family are all trying to get their needs met. When the needs of mothers come into conflict with those of their children, the ideologies of a good mother suggest that the only course of action is to subsume their needs to those of the child (Hays, 1996; Tronto, 1993). Not only are good mothers expected to subsume their desires for those they care for, but

modern mothers are also expected to be attentive to their children's individual ideas. Parents are expected to listen to children and acknowledge their food preferences to demonstrate their commitment to valuing the development of their children into individuals, whilst also serving healthy food and avoiding negative food encounters (Coveney, 2006).

Avoiding negative food encounters can be difficult if the meaning of food is viewed differently by mothers and children. Lupton (1996) conceptualises food as a gift, arguing that food made from scratch is symbolically a more valuable gift because of the increased labour involved in producing it. A study from Leeds (Woolhouse, Day & Rickett, 2019) agreed that mothers felt that the 'right meals' needed to be cooked by the mother from scratch. Daniels et al (2012) noted that in their Belgian study, those preparing meals for a family viewed cooking as an extension of love and care, bestowing more social meaning on the act of cooking than on other housework. Food is more closely associated with care and thus susceptible to the moral association with competent care.

When a carefully constructed meal is rejected, as children enact their agency, it can be a source of hurt to the mother who has made the food (Fishel, 2016; Lupton, 1996). Children are generally unaware that their mothers might think of food as a gift and simply consult their own tastes, as they have been taught to do as autonomous moral subjects (Cook, 2009). A mother's negative reaction to uneaten food can seem disproportionate to a child enacting their agency (Lupton, 1996).

## Good Eaters are Middle-Class Eaters

In the class context of meal kit users, children not only need to eat their food, but they also need to be good middle-class eaters. Middle-class omnivorousness is identified as encompassing three important factors: diversity, experientialism and knowledge (Kaplan, 2013). Middle-class eaters need to demonstrate an omnivorous palate, being accepting of and willing to try a wide range of flavours (Mellor, Blake, & Crane, 2010). Meal kits capitalise on this need by offering food that meets the criteria of middle-class eaters, but the service stops short of actually getting children to eat the food.

Mothers are left navigating the duality of children both needing to be acted upon and being encouraged to enact their own agency and identity in choosing what they like and dislike. Cook (2009) explains the moral quandary mothers have in trying to distinguish want from need and in many circumstances not being able to. However, if mothers do manage to

produce good eaters who choose the “right foods”, i.e. those that align with middle classness, they successfully produce the identity of a good mother (Coveney, 2006), so despite the inherent contradictions in meeting everyone’s needs, mothers still try to.

The literature on good eaters paints a complex picture of opposing forces, mothers and children often working towards different ends, or as Coveney, (2006, p. 120) puts it “subjects can never do the ‘right thing’ all the time.”

## Good Daughters Respect and Protect

Good daughtering, like good mothering, is not only created through the experiences of the individual but also influenced by cultural discourse (Korolczuk, 2010). While there is a plethora of information and discourse about how to be a good white middle-class mother, there is very little about how to be a good daughter. A communications study (Alford & Harrigan, 2019) on good daughtering found that daughters had trouble assessing and communicating their roles, drawing the conclusion that good daughtering is an underrepresented area of study. Nevertheless, Alford & Harrigan (2019, p.352) did manage to identify four role expectations of good adult daughters: respect, protection, eliciting mothering, and making time for connection. However, food as a site of daughterhood was not explored in this study.

Furthermore, the literature from Aotearoa concerning food and good daughtering is not associated with Pākehā middle-class women. The few studies from Aotearoa including foodwork mostly focus on migrant women, who use cooking as a way to connect with and remember older kin and their home country (Ore, 2018; Longhurst, Johnston, & Ho, 2009). I also found that writing on food and daughters was mostly focused on mothers and daughters, not parents and daughters. Memories of mothers’ foodwork are often used as references for future foodwork by adult daughters (Cairns, Johnston, & Baumann, 2015; Bugge and Almas, 2006; Lupton, 1996) which is unsurprising given the gendered nature of foodwork, and the fact that motherhood is the change that cements women into the role of key food workers within the family (Lupton, 1996; Devault, 1991; Herda, 1991). However, what I have discovered from my research is the importance of fathers as well as mothers in how women choose to feed their families, even when these women are continuing to do the majority of the foodwork.

## Family Morals

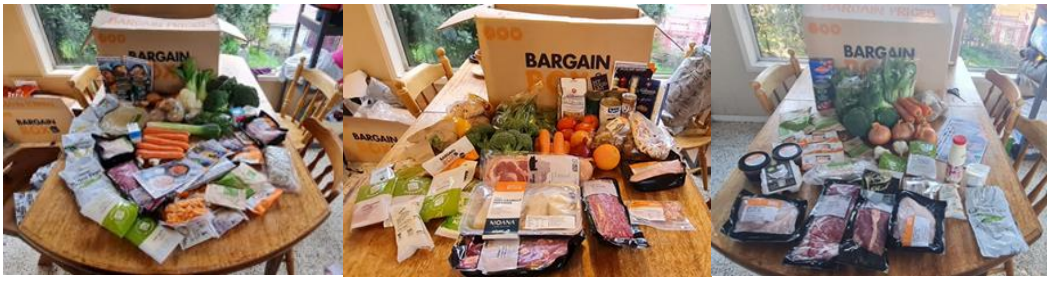
I connect the influence of both parents on the daughter's food work to the continuation of different family morals. Within the work involved in creating a family meal, there is more than family recipes being passed from one generation to the next (Cano & Hofmeister, 2023; Fishel, 2016; Cairns and Johnston, 2015; Wilk, 2010; Lupton, 1996) and the importance of implicit learning during childhood must be considered (Oleschuk, 2019) to understand how behaviours are transmitted from parent to child. Kremer-Sadlik (2019) explored how moral experiences occur within the everydayness of mundane activities. Parents watched recorded mundane interactions with their children and theorised what moral understanding was underlying their behaviour. The parents explained how they were simultaneously trying to shape their children as good moral subjects and secure their identity as good parents. So not only are parents passing on gender roles and cooking practices, but they are also teaching children how they should conduct their lives in a moral way.

Furthermore, the quality of care, (which includes being fed) received as children influence "messages and attributes they learn to value and consequently, the kind of care they give and receive" (Kaplan, 2000, p.477). Our childhood experiences instil in us a vivid example of how to parent and Hays (1996) suggests that we attempt to raise our children the way we wanted to be raised. The influence of parents can be seen in the way children either resist or reproduce their behaviour (Davies & Fitchett, 2015) when they become parents themselves. This shows how family morals can be transmitted to the next generation through everyday actions, and how these can be either reproduced or resisted in mothering and feeding. Incorporating, the findings of Alford & Harrigan (2019) on what a good daughter does, I suggest from the foodwork literature a good daughter would respect and protect important family morals, by reproducing those morals within the new context of using meal kits.

## Concluding Thoughts

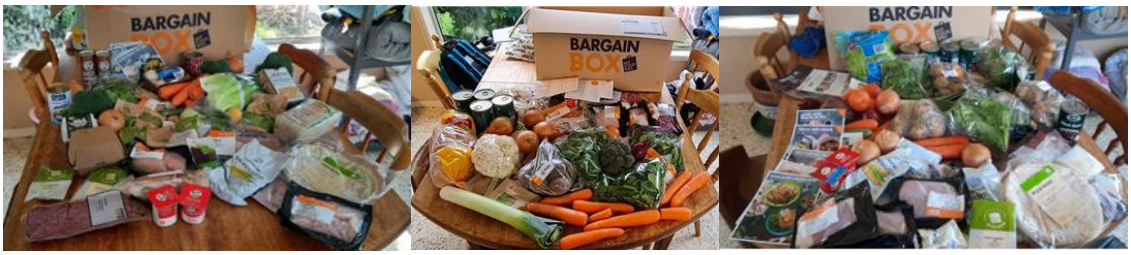
The literature shows an ever-present and persistent connection between motherhood, care, foodwork and morality. Feeding families is a complex site of moral action for mothers, and to provide morally competent care to their families, mothers need to be especially attuned to the context in which care is given. The ability for mothers to experience themselves as good mothers is based on the actions of not only themselves but those of their children. The literature of goodness in the context of middle-class Pākehā indicates that good children

should be autonomous moral subjects who choose and consume the right food, that good mothers are held individually responsible for what they feed their families, and that foodwork has much deeper moral meanings than other forms of housework. Food has not been explored as a site of good daughtering in a Pākehā middle-class context before. However, based on other research, the transmission of family morals in foodwork is a promising avenue to explore how good daughters and therefore good mothers are made via food. The research on meal kits situates this food provisioning system as convenient and morally more acceptable than convenience foods. Furthermore, meal kits can be used as a tool to increase the nutritional value of meals and to pass on cooking knowledge and mothers are the family members who benefit most from using meal kits. My research is situated at the intersection of meal kits and mothering and adds to the literature by illuminating how moral discourses of good mothering, good eating and good daughtering are reflected, challenged and transformed as meal kits are integrated into family life.



## Chapter Three

# Methods and Methodology




There is a jar clenched between my thighs. The jar once the keeper of gherkins now holds a rustic bouquet intended as a gift. My hands are busy as I manoeuvre the car down my steep driveway and onto the road. The trip I am taking is short and I reason that driving with a jar full of water and flowers wedged between my legs is safe enough over such familiar terrain. As I go over the speed bumps, my inner thighs flex and the glass feels cold and solid against my legs. However, in the back of my mind, I am all too aware of the fragility of glass.

I am driving towards my first foray into participant observation and the glass jar I have, perhaps inadvisably, nestled between my legs feels like a metaphor for my methodological journey thus far. My offering consists of a collection of blooms I have assembled using wildflowers and homegrown flora, it also represents an offering of my own experiences.

The glass jar represents my idea to explore the use of meal kits. This theme structures my experience and holds together what I have learned so far. The water inside the jar is my own experience using meal kits to feed my family. At this point, they are amorphous, loosely bound and slippery. Sprouting from the jar in the form of creamy white lilies, lush green ferns, and orange insectile-like flowers, are what I hope to achieve with the input of my participants.

This is what I offered my participants when welcomed into their homes, my ideas, my experiences, and the possibility of creating something together that is interesting, beautiful and homegrown. By keeping my eyes on the road, relaxing my muscles and going gently over the speed bumps I hope to arrive at my destination without being soaking wet and covered in glass shards with the delicate flowers crushed beneath my accelerator.

## Keeping my Eyes on the Road - Knowing where I am going and where I came from

To understand my methodological approach, I need to move away from my jar/flowers/ thighs metaphor and travel back to 2020 when I was completing my undergraduate degree. My last paper in social anthropology, rather cunningly, required the planning of viable fieldwork. I had an idea of what to study readily at hand. My personal experiences using meal kits very much pointed me towards this topic (Muncey, 2010). My initial design aimed to "explore how other families were perceiving their experiences with My Food Bag, and how this transformation of foodwork, may also be transforming cultural norms and identities around family meals and food." Since then, I have circled through various iterations of what I wanted to find out but always focused on the use of meal kits by families.

My original question stipulated I wanted to explore how *other* families were experiencing using meal kits. While my own experience had piqued my curiosity, I was determined to point the light of enquiry far away from myself. This is not what happened. In a bid to save my sanity, I opted to study part-time whilst raising my family and working. Therefore, before I was able to gain ethics approval and begin my fieldwork, I had an entire year at my disposal. With the encouragement of my supervisors, I began to document my family's response to using meal kits for one year before engaging in fieldwork with other mothers. Circumstances led me towards autoethnography. Using my own experiences shaped my methodology and changed the focus of my study leading to previously unthought-of areas.

After one year of recording my experiences with using meal kits, my research question had morphed into exploring how the regular use of meal kits affects family foodwork and the self-identity of mothers who feed families. Mothers were now at the forefront of my study.

When I was finally ready to talk to other mothers about their experiences with using meal kits, I was faced with the somewhat daunting task of finding participants. After a nerve-wracking period of fearing no one would want to speak to me. I realised that I already existed within a network of mothers who would be probable users of meal kits.

For over a decade I have been involved with Playcentre Aotearoa. My three children attended Playcentre exclusively and over the 13 years I have been involved with Playcentre, I have met hundreds of mothers. Through no planning on my part, it seemed that I was already a member of a group that I could use to source potential participants (Anderson, 2006). Utilizing my connections within this network proved successful. All but one of my

participants have been involved with Playcentre at some stage, and my other participant was found through the wider Playcentre network.

To offer some context around what Playcentre is: it is a parent-led cooperative early childhood education centre where parents and children learn alongside each other. This is a labour-intensive form of childcare where parents are expected to volunteer to run sessions and also hold a role within the centre such as treasurer, president or education officer. Simply put, families need to have the available time and resources to be an active part of Playcentre.

A report into Playcentre by Massey University in 2005 claimed:

> A typical Playcentre adult participant is likely to be 30-44 years of age, Pākehā, a native speaker of English, married and living with their spouse, parent of 2-3 children, owner of their own home, involved in part-time employment, and 40-50% of respondents were university or tertiary graduates.

In my recent experience with Playcentre, this profile is still relevant. I am a middle-class Pākehā mother, as are all my participants. Although there is variation within our similarities, I suspect that we would still be checking similar boxes on a census form.

## Participants

This study includes the experiences of six women, me being one of them. My participants reflect my journey across space, time and Playcentres. Two mothers, Jennifer and Ruby, were from my time in an urban Playcentre within a large metropolitan area, where I met them as a new and inexperienced mother. Katy, I met after my family moved to the outer suburbs, where I was positioned as the experienced parent, showing new members the ropes. After my children all graduated from Playcentre I continued to be involved in this world, working for another centre in the outer suburbs, which is where I met Becca a mother with an interest in academia, and an understanding of the importance of scientific enquiry. My final participant, Amanda, was suggested to me by another Playcentre mother, and although she had never been involved in Playcentre, she is part of a larger social group that includes many ex-Playcentre parents.

I position myself alongside not in front of or hiding behind my participants and therefore have included myself in the participant descriptions with the other mothers I worked with. However, my participants were given pseudonyms to protect their identity, and I have

retained my own name. I position myself as what has been termed a complete member researcher (Anderson 2006), both enmeshed within the group and researching it. We are all mothers, with children at the time of interviews ranging from 2 years to 18 years. At the time of research Becca and Amanda are mothers of two, Ruby, Katy and I are mothers of three and Jennifer is a mother of more than three. Our ages range from the mid-30s- to the late 40s. Becca is a stay-at-home mother, Ruby works full-time, and the rest of us work part-time, all of us are homeowners. Five of us reside with a co-parent, and Ruby is a single parent. All women have a tertiary qualification and at least two are involved in further study. Two women are expatriates from another colonial settler country and three to the best of my knowledge identify as Pākehā New Zealanders.

My first interaction with all of these women was one focused within the realm of motherhood. We got to know each other as mothers and until being involved in my project I was unsure of what many of these women did professionally. However, in looking at the consistent use of meal kits as a way to feed families, I am significantly narrowing down the group of mothers that can be involved. All the women I talked to have the financial means to use these services regularly. While the people I talked to are not economically disadvantaged, there are still issues of undervaluation, unequal workloads and loss of identity that need addressing. Thus, my attention has turned to the moral work and decisions that are associated with feeding the family, not the ability to feed them.

## Relaxing my Muscles - Embracing Autoethnography

The use of autoethnographic exploration has shaped my work enormously. In this way, autoethnography serves as my methodology as well as one of my methods. While the use of autoethnography is often associated with research involving trauma or emotional experiences (Ngunjiri, Hernandez & Chang, 2010), my purpose was to explore the mundane. I wanted to use autoethnography as a way to investigate everyday work that is performed often, but not always deeply thought about. By engaging with autoethnography it became clear that the connections to how we feed our families reach deeply into other aspects of our lives. In retrospect, perhaps I approached this task rather naively, underestimating the difficulty of exposing myself to so much self-questioning (Ellis, 1999). On one memorable occasion, I found myself in the public library with tears streaming down my face as I connected my obsession with foodwork to my late mother's disdain for it. Without the use of autoethnographic exploration, I believe there would be a richness of understanding missing

from my work, which is only accessible via knowing myself through consistent documentation and self-analysis (Vryan, 2006). While this approach was sometimes personally taxing for me, researching something that is part of my life before approaching others was integral to the shape my research would take. During my autoethnographic journey, I was able to deconstruct my own knowledge about cooking using meal kits, creating a new set of ways of knowing and experience through which to understand the experiences of my participants.

## Autoethnography as Method

My version of autoethnographic exploration took the form of a food diary. For one year, beginning in March 2021, I documented every meal that my family consumed that was created from a meal kit. This food diary provided a longitudinal view of my engagement with meal kits and allowed meanings to emerge via the passage of time (Chaplin, 2011). Initially, my diary was nothing more than a record of what the meal was and what my children would and would not eat, along with photographs of the meal. Gradually this record became more than dry facts, and strewn through my meal kit journal, is also a record of my guilt, fears and frustration around food, my family, and even my choice to engage with autoethnography. I was able to recognise patterns in my foodwork, such as recognising how much I cook compared to my husband, or how many times I wrote the word guilt in a year (12 times). This in-depth insight into what I was doing every day, was only accessible via the consistent engagement every day. My food journal allowed me to see the influence of larger structures present within my day-to-day life.

However, my initial intention was always to speak with other mothers about their experiences, I wanted to avoid entirely basing my work on a dialogue with myself, fearing this could easily veer towards self-absorption (Anderson, 2006). Having the foundation of understanding that my year-long food journal gave me was invaluable when it came to engaging in dialogue with my participants. I had unlocked axes of inquiry that may have remained hidden if I had not spent the time examining my own practice.

## Going Gently over the Speed Bumps - Gathering information thoughtfully

While I had found my year-long documentation exceedingly valuable, it was not practical or ethical to inflict the same schedule on the other mothers. With my thirst for long-term

research sated, I decided on a combination of short forays of participant observation (Pink, 2004) coupled with co-created interviews to generate the rest of my knowledge.

The night before I sent out my proposed research outline to people who had expressed interest in being involved, I panicked. I had intended to carry out three instances of participant observation with each mother, but this now seemed an indecent thing to ask a busy mother to agree to. I did what any earnest anthropologist in training would do, I emailed my supervisors outside of office hours. The response was concise "You could do one to start with and see how it goes?", sage advice. I suspect I was not the first student to lose their nerve. After some rewriting on my information sheet, I settled on asking for one definite instance of participant observation session at each home but leaving the scope open for more. The process that evolved from my nervousness was a truly participant-led and participant-accommodating approach.

My participants had the autonomy to choose where we met, how many times we met and what time we met. Jennifer only uses meal kits to feed herself and her husband, not their children. She also only cooks using meal kits twice a week, with her nanny cooking the other times. Jennifer suggested meeting in a café to talk, and because that arrangement worked better for her, I was more than happy to oblige. I did not carry out participant observation with Jennifer, but during our interview Jennifer was eloquent, and showed she had thought deeply about her use of meal kits, having been an earlier adopter of the system. Plus, I had known Jennifer for over a decade meaning the rapport was built years before. This short but intensive interaction was what I was gifted, and I respected this offer.

## Participant Observation

My four other participants all engaged with participant observation which was carried out in their homes. Katy, who had told me that using meal kits "saved me" was keen to share her experiences. She invited me into her house to prepare meal kits on three different occasions. This arrangement worked for her because she was interested in the topic and had experience working within a meal kit company. Amanda, Ruby and Becca did invite me to their houses for one session of cooking, which was exactly what I had asked for.

I did not take notes during the cook-a-long encounters, preferring to be fully present in the moment and to keep my hands free to be of some assistance in cooking. Straight after each experience, I wrote down my impression of the encounter and any pertinent questions. This technique kept the interactions fresh in my mind. Also, because these sessions took place at

dinner time, I always made it clear I would not stay to eat, to remove any pressure on my participants.

These experiences gave me a glimpse into my participants worlds. I was able to engage all my senses when involved with cooking and I learnt how each mother approached the task of cooking, which hinted at what they found most important in foodwork. Importantly this was a time that was a fertile space to gather observations that could be explored in the subsequent interviews.

## Interviews

After the participant observation cooking visits, I returned to interview participants. The location where these interviews took place was decided by each participant as I wanted it to be somewhere they felt comfortable. For Amanda, Ruby and Katy, the interviews took place in their homes, however, to fit around their schedules the interviews were at varying times. I conducted the following types; on a Sunday afternoon in a kitchen lazily drinking tea and eating biscuits, on a snatched weekday lunch break between work and school pick up where noodles were slurped and wet hair wrapped in a towel and during a hushed weeknight where gumboots were painted and Chardonnay sipped as we whispered in the kitchen, mindful of sleeping children. Becca preferred to meet in a public place, which is where I learned the difficulty of recording interviews with live music in the background. All the interviews were recorded with permission, and transcripts were produced that were then thematically analysed.

Our interviews were co-created and interactive, more like conversations than a series of questions that demanded answers. Interactive interviews are often constructed over multiple sessions within the context of established relationships (Adams, 2008 cited in Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011), and while I only formally asked for only one interview session, I had already established relationships with all of my participants. During these interactions, I drew on the previous experiences we had shared, in participant observation and our previously established relationships. There were also aspects of meal kits from my own experiences that I wanted to discuss, and these were woven into the conversation. Helpfully, these women were reflexive and self-aware enough to articulate clearly their experiences, and confident enough to disagree with or contradict any of my speculations. We knew each other as mothers and our conversations developed a natural flow when talking about how we feed our families. There was never a shortage of conversation as we talked about feeding families, as

we all had numerous experiences to draw from, Becca even suggested a second recorded interview after she had tried a new meal kit for the first time, which we carried out at a local bar and restaurant which I made sure did not have a live band playing.

### Soaking Wet Clothes and Glass Shards - When methods go astray

There is a messiness to the ethnographic process which is often rendered opaque in the writing. I believe in acknowledging the unexpected turns my research has taken. This is not to say I do not struggle with my vanity when recounting dead ends, mishaps or mistakes. As much as I want to present myself as an all-knowing competent researcher, equipped for all occasions, this is not the case. My fieldwork was accompanied by more stumbling, doubt and fear than I would like to admit. Subjecting myself to a lengthy period of autoethnographic introspection before involving other people was one way I hoped to protect and care for my participants. I theorised that because I had been through the experience, I was creating a sense of empathy with my participants (Ngunjiri, Hernandez & Chang, 2010) and a clear understanding of what I was asking them to do. However, the relationship between researcher and participant is unevenly weighted, with me relying on participants to participate in the research. I was aware that my identity as a mother does not imply that my positionality is automatically innocuous (Anderson, 2006). There was an uneven benefit to the mothers being involved in this work, with the benefits falling heavily on my side. I was therefore keen to give back to my participants in some way that benefitted them. This is where things took an unanticipated turn.

I had imagined an immersive experience when I went into people's houses to help cook dinner. I intended to assist in cooking, helping my participants feed their families as I stirred, whisked, seasoned and sautéed. What really happened was that each night I would return home with the smell of a foreign dinner clinging to my clothes, feeling deflated at my lack of helpful participation. Turns out, I was not much help to people in their kitchen. These women were well-oiled cooking machines, knowing exactly where everything was, and I mostly got in the way and cut vegetables into the wrong shape. I suspect I was a more hindrance than help. Where I did end up being of help, was when there were children around, who knew me from Playcentre. Interacting and playing with children is a strength of mine and I occupied children by reading books, crawling through tunnels, being fed mandarin segments, being caught in a trap and even having my limbs cut off. Becca commented, "I feel like I have just

employed childcare while I cook dinner". On reflection, I think I did help some of my participants, but not in the way I had intended to.

My other major deviation came from my autoethnographic experience. My journal contained a photographic representation of every meal kit meal we ate. I noticed that the photographs my research assistant/husband took varied from mine. The composition of his photographs and the presentation of food in his images were much more considered and aesthetically pleasing than mine. He mostly took photos when he cooked, and I wondered if this represented a deeper meaning which was linked to our different attitudes to cooking. Thrilled with the results that this method has yielded in my life, I asked participants to photograph their meal kit food, in any way they wanted. However, warning bells began to ring when several participants questioned what kind of photographs I wanted and were confused by my attempts to enable a fully participant-led process. I was trying to understand their relationship to food via photographs, and they were trying to figure out what exactly I wanted (MacClancy, 2004). I did receive at least a few photos from each person, but this part of the research was largely side-lined, and the discovery I thought might provide profound results, fizzled out. My plans to use these participant-captured images in photo-elicitation interviews came to nought. On one occasion I printed the pictures and took them along to the interview. These images never made it out of my purse, because as we talked, presenting the images seemed forced and I did not want to ruin the ease of communication that had developed between us.

## Avoiding Crushed Flowers - Ethical Considerations

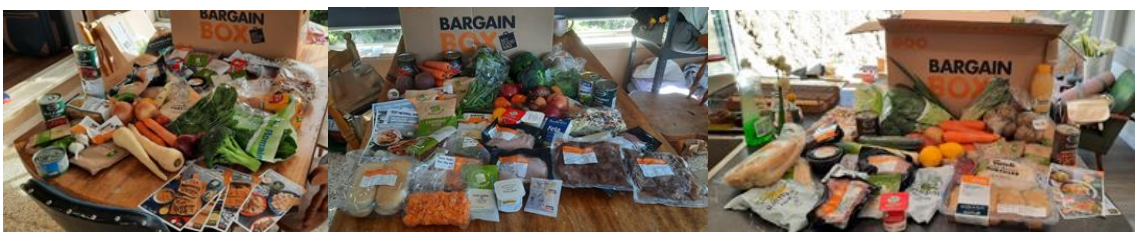
This study is not one that I would describe as ethically fraught. However, when attempting to represent the views and lives of others, it would be remiss not to carefully consider the ethics of the situation. I am focusing on mothers, and this is a relational identity, that is, having children is integral to being a mother. There are people other than my participants who will be implicated in this work, notably children but also spouses and parents (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011). Again, because of my own autoethnographic pursuits, I was aware that my story did not belong to me alone (Sparkes, 2018). My food diary was filled with references to my family, and not all were flattering. It is impossible to do valuable autoethnographic work without being aware of and examining the ethics entwined in your representations (Jago, 2002), and I intended to do valuable autoethnography. My family was supportive of my exploits, but the seriousness of ethics is not diminished because I was looking at my own life (Adams & Herrmann, 2020). Before sharing any part of my journal with outside parties, I

would check in with each member of my family to see if they were happy with me using their words. This allowed them some aspect of control over how they were represented.

However, I was unable to extend this level of control to the families of my participants. What I have been able to do is respect the agency of my participants and their ability to make decisions about their own families. My request for participants would have reached hundreds of women and these five accepted the invitation while the majority did not. They accepted my invitation because they wanted to be involved. The collaborative nature of all interactions also allowed space for participants have the power to remain silent, evade questions, and redirect the narrative (Gabb, 2010). I allowed flexibility for my participants to set the parameters of their involvement, which can be seen in the variety of locations and the number of interactions they were involved with. I also put trust in these women when speaking about their families. I respected their ability to be the expert in their relationships, with an assurance that I would maintain anonymity within my work as much as possible.

## Concluding Thoughts

Autoethnography has been a driving force in my methodology, I am present on every page, both overtly as a participant but also in the framing of the work. However, it is the amalgamation of my experiences with Becca, Jennifer, Katy Amanda and Ruby's experience that places the flowers in an empty jar and brings this ethnography to life. The combination of autoethnography, participant observation and co-constructed interviews creates a breadth of experiences that allows everyday practice to be at the forefront. The themes I discuss in the upcoming chapters grew from our interactions. I have purposely targeted good eaters, good mothers, and good daughters; however, these three categories are not the whole story. More of the story is nestled within the following pages, tales at the humblest level, of ordinary everydayness.



## Chapter Four

# Good Eaters - Guilt and Gastronomy in a box


Being a good mother requires a good child, and a good child, in the context of feeding is a good eater. Dinner is the meal where children are most likely to be under close surveillance, it is also the primary meal where mothers can ascertain if food is being received and eaten. Thus, family dinner time can be an intimate and vulnerable time for mothers to be observed (Le Moal et al, 2021; MacKendrick & Pristavec, 2019) because it is a site where the good mother identity can be reproduced or challenged, depending on whether children accept the care offered. Arthur Kleinman (2014) positions care as a burden, but also something that nourishes and ennobles the caregiver. While Kleinman was not talking about feeding children their dinner using meal kits, I agree that caregiving can nourish and ennoble, but that generating these positive feelings relies on the care offered being received. The only way care can be received, and hence caring needs met when feeding children, is if food is consumed. However, if mothers are thwarted in the attempt to feed children using meal kits, it can bring into question their position as good mothers. Most of the mothers I spoke to had been thwarted in one way or another and I argue that without being able to fully meet the care needs of their children at dinner time, it is difficult for mothers to fully embrace their use of meal kits.

### Eating Dinner and Accepting Care

During my forays into participant observation, I never stayed for dinner. I always made a point of leaving after we had prepared the meal. I had no desire to cause discomfort by outstaying my welcome in my participants' homes to witness the rejection or consumption of care. However, in my own life, I have access to all areas of dinner-related discomfort. I very rarely recorded mealtime interactions during my year-long food journal, but one particular dinner had such an effect on me that I noted it down.

The following vignette is a reconstruction of a dinner that occurred on 2 August 2021. Although this mealtime interaction was more explosive than most, it closely follows the script of many dinners consumed before and after this one. The speakers are not explicitly identified to preserve a degree of anonymity, and all of my family members have consented to me reproducing the scene.

**Dinner – A scene**

*The family is assembled around the dining table. A 12-year-old child sits next to their father (mid-30s) a young child is at the end of the table.*

*Mother and child (9) sit opposite the father and child. There is chicken, rice and beans made from a meal kit on the table. There is also an extra platter of fresh fruit and vegetables.*

Chicken again!

Yeah, I don't like chicken either.

You ate it last night.

There's rice, just try that.

Where's the soy sauce?

I used it last week.

What! How am I supposed to eat this??

*Bangs hands on the table.*

Balsamic?

No!

Jesus, just try your dinner!

I don't like chicken there is no soy sauce. What am I supposed to eat? Why do you never make anything that I like? Why?

*Hands slam on the table.*

Look, mum, I'm trying the chicken even though I don't like it, and I'm trying the rice, even though I don't like it.

Thank you.

Fine, no Xbox for a day if you don't at least try your dinner.

That's not fair!!!!!!!

That is completely fair, you have never tried it before, how do you know that you don't like it?

I don't like chicken!!!!!!!!!

Fine. No more trips to the diary. No more eating crap and then not trying your dinner. I am so sick of you children wasting the good food that I make.

Mum, I'm done, can I go?

Sure.

I'm done.

*All exit except the 9-year-old who is left alone at the table sobbing.*

I had cooked a nutritious meal for my family, and I had even provided healthy alternative choices for my children if they did not like the main meal. The alternative to dinner was a plate of fresh fruit and vegetables, dubbed the "scurvy platter". This irreverent moniker hints at the importance placed on nutrition in our house and forewarns my children about the dangers of not eating well. I had done what I could to ensure a good family meal, I was trying to be a good mother by offering nutritious healthy varied food. And yet I doubt anyone who reads the above script would describe that family meal as a success. I left the table feeling frustrated at my child, I thought if only they would eat, then we could enjoy a meal as a family. Instead, the meal was a negative experience for everyone involved.

## Good Eaters Choose Good Food

While I was not present at any other dinner tables except my own, when I analysed interview transcripts and my own food journal, I found many of the feelings I had felt at dinner that night mirrored back to me. Words such as worthless, terrible, failure, selfish, guilty, lazy, crap, and bad were used by mothers to describe themselves and their actions associated with feeding work. To be clear I understood the context of how these words were used to be more self-deprecating or deflective rather than reflecting serious self-loathing. What was interesting was all but one of the mothers, used at least one of these words when talking about themselves.

In *Food, Morals and Meaning* (2006) Coveney outlines the dilemma modern parents face when feeding their children. Parents must respect their children's individuality and ability to make food choices while also ensuring that children have a healthy and nutritious diet. These nutritious meals should also be consumed while maintaining a congenial and happy environment around eating, lest children form negative associations with food that impact their future relationships with food. Creating good eaters becomes a moral obligation to being a good mother. Factors such as the age of children, the pressures outside of the family and our own childhood experiences influence the strategies we employ to produce good eaters and thus become good mothers. When these strategies yield mixed results, it can influence how we talk about ourselves with negative words and how conflicted we feel about feeding our families using meal kits.

## A Mother of Good Eaters

The mother whose transcripts did not include any negative words was Katy, and I believe there were two reasons for this. Katy was perhaps the most excited person to participate in the research, because of her past experiences with meal kits. In our first contact, she explained that using meal kits had saved her when her children were babies. When she was pregnant with her second child her midwife suggested using Bargain Box, Katy said:

> I'd never thought of doing anything like that, it seemed like a good idea. But it wasn't for the reasons that I thought it was for. It was more because I learned how to build a meal a bit better.

Katy had come to understand that her own nutrition was vital to keeping the family well. As a mother, who used her body to feed her children, Katy needed to fuel her body to be able to continue that care, and using meal kits enabled her easy access to a nutritionally balanced meal. One could view the midwife's recommendation as Katy being prescribed meal kits by a health professional, to maintain the well-being of her entire family. The idolisation of the mother as the ultimate nurturer and symbol for family love (Hochschild, 2004), is a difficult construct to refute. I believe that the ability of meal kits to enable Katy to maintain the role of nurturing mother helped to validate Katy's choice to use meal kits in a way that was inaccessible for the rest of us, whose meal kit origin stories were in no way as visceral.

However, I think the real difference in outlook is connected to the fact that as Katy's babies grew into young children, all three of them actually eat the food made using meal kits. In her words, her children are "good eaters":

> They eat most things, like they eat the vegan stuff I bring home. Yeah they are good eaters. They just decided last week that they all love Tabasco sauce, so they are putting that on everything. They seem to like most food bag stuff. Once I got the schmancy one. I was like it's my birthday, I want to get the gourmet for one week just to see what it was like. It was alright, but they wanted all of that because it was on my plate.

Her children will eat a variety of nutritious food and try new flavours and Katy understands her role in this relationship is to continually offer different food experiences, saying:

> I want to expose them to everything, and they can make their choices.

Katy's children are making the 'right' choices, the choice to consume nutritious and eclectic food. I cannot help but think that if this was the case with my children, I may not have felt so conflicted about my use of meal kits.

After recording my own experiences with meal kits, I recognised that the idea of guilt was recurring, which also resonated with some of the other mothers I spoke with. But when I broached the idea of feeling guilt with Katy her answer was a definitive 'no'. She had no regrets about her decision to use meal kits and was only now reducing her use of meal kits because of expense:

> Oh, yeah, it was monetary. It was priorities, we weren't at that stage anymore. It was spending money that we don't need to spend.

This was a practical decision rather than meal kits no longer being fit for purpose, her children were already good eaters, and she was a competent cook who enjoyed creating food for her family. During our interview, she advised me:

> You kind of have to pick your ideals and not overcomplicate it too much.

Excellent advice, but often hard to follow.

### A Mother Who is a Good Eater

At the other end of the good eater spectrum is Jennifer, a mother of many who has been using meal kits for nearly a decade. However, Jennifer's children do not get the opportunity to accept or reject meal kits. She uses the vegetarian meal kit from My Food Bag for four meals every week, but only to feed herself and her husband. Jennifer is modelling being a good eater by consuming the good food from the My Food Bag, but she does not use meal kits to facilitate her children being good eaters. Jennifer explains that most of her children:

> Would never do vegetarian, I don't think. The problem is that the age range of seven to 17 almost 18 is quite long. So, what the seven-year-old likes versus what the 18 will eat is different.

As a solution to this variation in tastes, Jennifer allows her numerous children to have meals that are both separate from herself, but also from each other:

> There's the staples for the children, they might all have pasta, or potatoes, vegetables, rice, then there'll be different protein. Like tonight, they're all having chicken burgers, they'll all eat chicken burgers. But tomorrow night there'll be some kids eating chicken on a stick and other kids that will be having steak and others that are vegetarian. One of my daughters is vegetarian, well she's, pollotarian, she only eats chicken. She's just never been a very good eater.

Jennifer is aware of her power to provide this unique dinner-time solution to juggle the preferences of children who are not all good eaters. Jennifer works part-time in the health field and her husband works full-time, and they have the means to indulge in what Jennifer described meal kits as "certainly a luxury." She also understands what the alternative would be if she chose to force a united family meal:

> I think I enable my kids I could just force them, but the fight is just so…. [lost for words] We have times when I walk around my house because there's so many children to fight with. I say to each of them "*Don't* talk to each other, *don't* even talk to each other". And there's a couple that can't talk to each other and then Tyler and

> Isabel they shouldn't talk. Abby and Dylan just don't talk to each other. And then at the dinner table, it's quite hard because they all want to talk.

Despite mothering many children, working in a specialised field and being married to a husband who works long hours, during our interview, Jennifer claimed that:

> I'm worthless because I have a nanny, three days a week.

Whether this comment was a practised tactic to pre-empt critique, or the result of her self-deprecating nature is unclear, but it does demonstrate an understanding of a discrepancy between what she does and what she understands as the ideal. This discrepancy is also evident in how she understands her use of meal kits stating:

> I recommend the philosophy, I don't know if I recommend the way we use it. I wish we all sat down and did that [ate the same meal] around the table, but we just don't.

Jennifer understood that the perceived gold standard of family meals was the persistent idea that the best family meals are when all members are present around the table and eating the same food. Despite this not being how many families eat dinner, and this type of dinner requiring extra work on the part of mothers (Le Moal et, 2021; Lindsay et al, 2021), the ideal is still in place.

## Not Good Enough Mothers

Mothers being aware of all the ways we fell short of the cultural perception of a good mother flowed through my research. Even if we do not believe in behaving in the way a good mother is expected to, such as the self-sacrificing intensive mothers of Hays (1996), the discourse is difficult to ignore. Although seated family dinners did not work for her family, Jennifer still understood what family meals "should" be and did not perceive her way of using meal kits as something others should aspire to.

The intrinsic goodness of homemade meals is another discourse that is hard to ignore, and using meal kits definitely makes it easier to cook at home. When taking the easier option of providing homecooked meals does not result in good eaters, it is understandable that feelings of discontent may intermingle with the relief of using meal kits. However, this disquiet is subtle, like many actions and decisions that we make every day and only appear when we pay close attention. Looking at the experiences of all six women, allowed me to notice how most

of us are undermining ourselves in our own rhetoric. And while this undermining is infinitesimal and almost invisible, it is still there.

In the spirit of not undermining mothers, I also have to acknowledge that I have made a clear division in my analysis between those of us with good eaters and those without. I am wary of claiming that mothers with good eaters have an easier job of mothering. All our situations are nuanced, including the number of children and the support networks we have access to. Feeding is only one aspect of motherhood and I want to be clear that I am not suggesting that having good eaters is synonymous with easy mothering.

### A Mother Who was not a Good Eater

Neither Becca, Amanda, Ruby nor I described our children as good eaters. Ruby and I each have three children whereas Amanda and Becca are mothers of two. In this mixture of children, some are better eaters than others, but overall, no cohort of children meets the threshold to be considered good eaters. Still, we continue to use meal kits in the hope that we will eventually have good eaters, and the use of meal kits will help to facilitate this change, or at least we can share the failure with meal kits if no change occurs. Amanda was particularly adamant about not raising picky eaters. She explained that this was a result of her own experiences:

> I was a child from a single-mother household, and no brothers and sisters. And I was very picky, and my mum was very busy. So, it was much easier for her [to accommodate my pickiness]. She also didn't have a very wide range of foods that she liked to eat. So, it was very basic. We ate a lot of really not exciting food. It wasn't until my mum married a chef that our horizons broadened quite a lot. I was in my mid-teens then. I was very picky right up until my 20s, where I was like, this is ridiculous, I want to eat anything. It took a long time to get there. The thing I was quite conscious of with our kids is that I don't want them to be picky. I don't want them to have to try to break down those barriers later. Oh god, there were so many foods on my list that I didn't want to eat when I was a kid. I want my kids to try to be more open and I try to feed them stuff that they haven't had before. And I really praise them massively when they try something new.

Along with praising her children when they try something new, Amanda sometimes needed to get in her words, “crafty” to encourage her children to try a new meal. She recounts:

> We had a fish in curry, but I called it ‘coconut sauce’, and suddenly, Oh, it's not so bad.

Amanda is determined to create good eaters, something her mother was unable to achieve in her own childhood. As well as using praise, and gentle subterfuge, Amanda also utilises the variety offered by meal kits in an effort to broaden the horizons of her children’s palates:

> If I ask here what everybody wants to have, they all just answer the same things over and over. Often to madness. Chicken burgers, beef burgers, mac and cheese. That's it, oh and spaghetti bolognese. I mean, that's something. But that is the only answers that I'll ever get.

Amanda understood the difficulties of not being a good eater, and the limitations that places on living and her focus was doing the work to avoid her children facing the same issues she did. Using meal kits is part of her attempt to develop her children’s middle-class palates. The diversity of the food in meal kits helps to expose the children to a wide variety of flavours and hence turn them into good middle-class omnivorous eaters.

### A Mother of Eaters with Different Needs

Ruby’s situation with good eaters is different again. Ruby has three teenage children with her ex-husband. Her eldest lives with her full time and Ruby only uses meal kits when she is feeding herself and her eldest child, Hamish. Ruby uses a vegetarian meal kit every second week when her other children are at their father's because Hamish believes that eating red meat is not good for you. When I visited Ruby, Hamish was doing most of the cooking, as he often does, and Ruby told me he also happily consumes his efforts. Using the vegetarian meal kit enables Hamish to be a good eater as Ruby says:

> I've never made vegetarian food. So, it's sort of like, where you start? [Using meal kits] I don't actually have to try and work out whether that's a sensible combination of things.

However, her younger children are much more difficult to transform into good eaters. One of Ruby's children suffers from food allergies that cannot be catered for with meal kits, even if she wants to use them. She explains after a particularly hectic week:

> I'm tired and I thought, oh, maybe I'll get one this weekend that I can use when all the children are here. So, I looked at the things and there was a one that was like a chicken pie. But you just had like triangles with pastry. But the problem was that it had sour cream and so they wouldn't have been able to eat anything. I'd have to make them something and I just thought … ugh Why is it so hard? I mean, that's meant to make it easier, isn't it?

Coupled with the restrictions placed on what meals she can select because of her child's allergies, Ruby thought that the meal kits were:

> aimed at people with more sophisticated palates than my children. They had many years of plain food and then you go, "now eat this". Perhaps they would get used to over time. I don't have that kind of persistence.

Ruby had first tried meal kits when her children were much younger, during her separation when a friend suggested the kits might make things easier. However, Ruby found that her children's penchant for simple food was too strong to make using meal kits worthwhile:

> I didn't find that the family one was actually very family-friendly. It still had too many sauces and too much kind of stuff going on. And I found that I just sort of make the thing without the sauce. And then it's like, why am I paying you extra for something that's actually not being used?

Ruby was also unwilling to force the consumption of food, saying that:

> When the children are at their father's, they have to eat everything off their plate, and I've never forced anybody to eat anything. I say to them if you're full leave it, or if you don't like it.

Ruby has a gentle approach to encouraging her children to become good eaters, and much like with Playcentre philosophy, wants the process to be child-led. However, even when choosing to use an approach to creating good eaters that she believes in when her children do not comply, there is a sense of disappointment.

### A Mother Making Good Eaters

Becca was the only mother who had used meal kits prior to being a parent, trying them for the first time out of curiosity when she lived in London. Her children will not have had to navigate the awkward transition from home-cooked family meals to meal kits that Ruby and I are going through with our families.

Furthermore, Becca has the youngest children in the group and is still actively involved in Playcentre, where the focus is on guiding children as they explore the world. She extends this philosophy when it comes to eating:

> I *try* to model that sort of down-to-earth vibe. I definitely don't always succeed. We do a bit more of encouraging like eating mince and veggies.

Even with verbal encouragement and modelling, Becca struggles with getting her children to consume the fresh produce she offers them:

> My kids don't eat any salad ingredients. I put it on their plate, and they take it off and put it on mine.

This reaction does not deter Becca from still trying to cultivate good eaters:

> I once read something that, you could expose children to food multiple times. So, I'll keep putting salad there and one day they might eat it. I mean I don't think it will ever work, but I'm going for familiarity, like if you see it enough times maybe one day, you'll just be like "oh, I'll eat that."

As well as continuously exposing her children to nutritious fresh food, in the hope of eventual acceptance, Becca also teaches her young children about nutrition, which as we have seen from the literature is a key measure of what good food is:

> Jack likes to get strong so that's our main kind of dialect of how we talk about things. And we talk about nutrients. He's cottoned on to that kind of idea. He'll be like, "does this have more nutrients or this one?" And I will be "That one's probably got more nutrients", "That one will fill you up but probably doesn't have so much". But I try not to make too big a thing about it. And at the end of the day, he eats what he eats.

If children understand nutritional value better, they are well placed to choose good food and to become good eaters, thus enabling Becca to become a good mother when feeding her children.

## Privilege, Guilt and Good Food

### Meal Kits Supply Good Food

There was an understanding amongst the mothers that food supplied from meal kits was, as Katy articulates, "beautiful fresh food". When this good food is not used in a good way, either to create good eaters or failing that, to nourish the earth through composting, we can begin to feel morally remiss. Several times in my food journal I recount my guilt at having to feed expired or rejected meat to my pets, food that should have been utilised to make my children good eaters. I wrote:

> We actually fed the pork shoulder to our pets – along with a healthy dose of white middle-class guilt.

The middle-class guilt I was alluding to is connected to the acknowledgement that being able to use meal kits is a privilege, and wasting said privilege is morally abhorrent. While Amanda claimed not to feel guilty about using meal kits as a privilege, because in her circle of friends:

> Everybody's trying them. Everybody's giving it a go and not everybody embraces it.

Amanda did feel uncomfortable in how she dealt with the inevitable food scraps:

> I also thought about composting for a while. I'm like, maybe I need to be a good human, take care of the world. It's another thing for me to consider and think about,

> but to then to go out into the garden and turn it over, it's stinky. I will separate food waste and I'll do that and everything but if I'm responsible for it, then I'm crap at it. Maybe I'm just lazy. I don't know. I know some people who just compost up a storm.

For Amanda knowing people who use meal kits to feed their families brings a sense of validation to her own use. However, when she is making different choices from the 'good humans' she knows who compost, she sees herself as lazy. The discourses we are exposed to help to shape our ideas about what good moral people do and deviating from these causes unease.

During our interview, Amanda commented:

> I just feel like this is my job and making sure that we have healthy stuff to eat and keeping it all, full and organized.

But also:

> It's hard to imagine what I do if I if I weren't carrying the weight of this family on my shoulders.

Even though Amanda conceives of feeding her family well as her job, the weight of this is more oppressive than a paid job, because of the moral attachment to feeding. Carrying the weight of feeding a family on her shoulders does not seem like the behaviour of a lazy person and yet she infers that she is not a good human, because she fails at one morally responsible task of not wasting food.

### Middle-Class Privilege

Becca is the only stay-at-home mother who is not also in paid employment in some capacity. She understands using meal kits as:

> A privilege, and I think that is where that guilt starts because I know it's a privilege. I definitely do feel like that sort of stigma, like it being kind of lazy. I find especially in that childless group of friends there is a bit of "What do you do all day?". You know that sort of stigma, and that would certainly be in an environment where I might not air that I use meal kits because they might feel like, that's just lazy. Like "you're just sitting around at home all day, you don't need to do that, I've been in the office all day so I could do that". Maybe it is all in my head.

Becca is concerned with the frivolity of using meal kits to produce good eaters when she is a stay-at-home parent and perceives that others think she could achieve this without using meal kits.

I would describe the way Becca uses meal kits as anything but lazy. Becca uses meal kits about half of the time and she adds extra food to bulk the meals out, stretching a kit designed to feed four people for three nights to feed two adults and two young children for six nights. She also flips between meal kit providers to avoid paying full price for the food:

> I have a whole lot of alarms set on my phone to remind me of the different companies, cut-off times and every now and again I've stuffed it up and accidentally ended up with a box that I didn't want.

Becca is performing extra labour by hunting out bargains, and still is conscious of being perceived as lazy, because she understands, as do all the other mothers, the power of the lingering connection between mothers and 'proper' foodwork. The use of meal kits as a new provisioning system is still too new to have been incorporated into the discourses of good mothering, and each of us is navigating how we continue to use meal kits while remaining good.

## Guilty Mothers

While, the others are cognisant of the connection of mothers and foodwork, Ruby and I experienced our identities as mothers to be more tightly connected with providing homemade food to our children. We met at Playcentre, but I have always been a stay-at-home mother and student and Ruby holds an executive position within the public service sector, so we come from vastly different circumstances. However, her interview was the one where I laughed the most, so perhaps our similar outlook is connected to complementary personalities and a penchant for self-deprecation, something we both acknowledge and try to remedy. Ruby let me know that now she was "actively trying" not to be quite so hard on herself. More advice that is wise but often difficult to follow. Ruby explained:

> When I first started with meal kits, I felt bad, like A)They're quite expensive and B) doesn't a proper mother just know how to create food for the family?

I also had quite specific ideas about what a proper stay-at-home mother should do which strangely included keeping the house clean, something I loathe. Writing that:

> When my husband suggested getting a cleaner my immediate reaction was of being a failure, that I was not doing a good enough job, so I had to have help. That is how I feel a bit with My Food Bag even though I enjoy it there is guilt associated with it.

I became quite obsessed with the idea of losing my worth as I relied on meal kits week after week. So much so that one time when I made dinner under my own steam I wrote:

> It is a relief that I can cook something for my family that they will like, there is a sense of pride that I can still do that without My Food Bag.

Suggesting that using meal kits was diminishing my value to my family, a conflict I have now come to terms with, thanks to the deep introspection associated with autoethnography. Once I was aware of how mothering, food, care and self-worth are entangled within the dominant discourses surrounding good mothering, I understood how I was internalising these ideas. This understanding allowed me to disconnect my own sense of self-worth from how I chose to feed my family and realise that I did not need to sacrifice my own time and needs to care for my children competently.

For Ruby, she questioned:

> As a single mother, am I allowed to buy the convenient, expensive thing?

Despite our different circumstances we had both internalised ideas about what a good mother is and being a single parent or stay-at-home parent who does the expensive, convenient thing is not morally acceptable. We had internalised the ideals associated with our gender as nurturers and caregivers (Tronto, 1993), and using meal kits challenged this because it felt like cheating or offloading our responsibility to care. This coupled with our children not uniformly being good eaters, led to us feeling less than good mothers.

The idea of not being good enough was peppered through Ruby's rhetoric:

> I do like cooking, but when there's free afternoon. And I do feel guilty about it. It's one of the things that I always think "oh if I was a better mother, I would do home baking". Here's another thing to feel terrible about; I don't bake and I work too much.

I get the sense that there is an ever-evolving list of ways in which Ruby feels she is not measuring up. However, the epitome of a family occasion, the Christmas meal was a turning point for Ruby:

> I was very stressed about Christmas. I was thinking, again, a good mother prepares a feast for Christmas. What I should be doing is choosing recipes, making shopping lists, going to four different stores to get all the different things. And I thought I'm gonna give myself a nervous breakdown. And my brain was just like, I can't do it. And then it just came like a light bulb. I was like, I could get the food bag. I had this real kind of guilt about it. I felt terrible about getting it. But at the same time, it's such a relief. And I'm so glad I did it, and it was yummy.

Despite her misgivings and reluctance to do the easier thing, Ruby found herself in a position where her mental health was at risk. As Katy found with her midwife's advice, it seems that when the stakes are high enough to threaten our health, it becomes easier to accept doing the contentious thing. We feel more comfortable using meal kits if there is a tangible reason other than our own care, reinforcing the notion of the self-sacrificing mother.

## Concluding Thoughts

The identity of being a good mother relies on having good children, children who are good eaters. If feeding families using meal kits does not result in good eaters, it makes it harder for mothers to justify the use of meal kits. I have found that we mothers are adept at noticing all the ways we fail, lamenting that our efforts using meal kits are not environmentally friendly enough, are wasteful, are lazy and not what "proper" mothers would do. We have an internalised idea of what a good mother would do, an ideal shared by cultural discourses. Using meal kits to feed families is not a straightforward economic exchange, but an ethical obstacle course with different obstacles in place for each mother, depending in part on our intersubjective experiences. However, despite having to navigate this moral obstacle course we are still consistently using meal kits. All of us are consistent users of meal kits, not occasional dabblers, using these kits month after month, despite our often-conflicting feelings associated with them. In the next chapter, I explore why we persist in using meal kits and why we are largely unwilling to return to our previous food provisioning system.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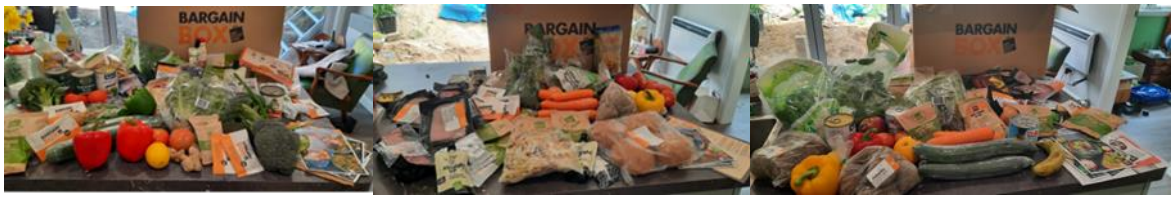
## Chapter Five

# Good Mothers and Good Meals – Competent Care and Care of Self




My visit to Katy's house started inauspiciously, my penchant for attractive but inappropriate shoes means I slip three times as I climb the steep driveway. Buffered by the wind and clutching my jar of flowers, I eventually make it to the bevelled glass front door. To my relief, I notice a neat pile of shoes nestled on the front step. I slip off my footwear and knock. As soon as the door opens, three children come pouring out, the eldest two cloaked in a drab school uniform and the youngest like an exotic flower in purple stripes. Amongst the excited chatter, we make our way to the spacious kitchen at the back of the house. It feels very much like I am back at Playcentre with colouring supplies, craft materials and dress-ups exploding out of every corner: their house is a happy chaos of children and creative energy. My skills are put to good use as the children descend upon me. I have pictures drawn of me; my hairstyle critiqued, my purse searched, and my arm amputated. Once I have been soundly vetted, Katy lures the children out of the kitchen with the promise of half an hour of TV before dinner. I glance around a see a photo wall of family adventures that captures the fun-loving and exuberant nature of the household. I feel comfortable in this atmosphere and have no qualms about offering to help cook. After all, I know how to cook meal kits for three children because I do so most nights. Over the next half an hour, I discovered the problems with assumptions.

I grated the carrot with the skin on.  Katy had to spend time fishing out the brown bits.

I cut the capsicum into pieces that were too big. Katy had to ask me to make them smaller because she wanted the pieces to fit on a spoon.

I then asked Katy how to cut the cucumber correctly before ruining it with my assumptions.

Finally, I cottoned on to the fact that despite the fact we were cooking the exact meal that I was going to make for my own family, who you were cooking for was more important than what you were cooking.

It turned out that when I am cooking for children who are not my own, I really do not know how to cook properly. It became clear that skills used in caring for one family are not transferable to caring for another family.

The story above is an example of how using meal kits allows us to provide competent, bespoke care to our families, something that other methods of feeding, such as convenience food or takeaways do not allow.

This chapter will further explore the idea of good mothers providing competent care and focus on research findings that despite the subtle negativity associated with using meal kits, we persevere. I explore two conflicting modes of care when using meal kits. The first part of the chapter looks at the ways meal kits allow mothers to provide competent care to their families. The second part of the chapter focuses on the care of mothers, and how using meal kits meets their care needs by sharing the responsibility of the family foodwork burden. I argue that using meal kits really is care for mothers and not parents in general and that meal kits allow the perpetuation of gender inequality in foodwork, but also challenge ideas of the self-sacrificing mother. These contradictory axes of care are what make it difficult for mothers to return to the pre-meal kit systems of foodwork.

## Meal Kits and Competent Care

***The fact that it's been cooked is quite good. It could just be UberEATS. (Jennifer)***

The benefits of using meal kits include the ability to share foodwork with other members of the family, the elimination of thought work, variety in meals and protection from rejection of care. Arguably these benefits could also all be provided by takeaways or convenience food, such as supermarket ready meals, or microwave meals. What makes using meal kits different is that they incorporate competent care. Tronto's ethic of care suggests that to provide moral care, the care needs to be competent.

> To include competence as a part of the moral quality of care, is obviously to align this approach with moral consequentialism. Intending to provide care, even accepting responsibility for it, but then failing to provide good care, means that in the end the need for care is not met…. making certain that the caring work is done competently must be a moral aspect of care if the adequacy of the care given is to be a measure of the success of care. (Tronto, 1993, p.133)

Because the food in meal kits still needs to be cooked this gives mothers an opportunity to adjust the food using the knowledge they have about how to care for their families. Thus, meet the criteria of the care being competent because the care given encompasses " a deep and thoughtful knowledge of the situation, and of all of the actors' situations, needs and competencies" (Tronto, 1993, p.136). This knowledge comes from experience, from being the parent who does the majority of the foodwork. In this way, using meal kits enables the continuation of the gendered nature of foodwork. By alleviating some of the work of creating dinner and it is easier for women to continue to carry out the family foodwork unaided by other family members, but it also satisfies the moral responsibility to provide competent care.

The doing or cooking is a central part of meal kits, the work that transforms economic capital into care. Becca explains how she understands using meal kits:

> You're paying extra for the convenience factor, but it is still like you gotta put the chicken in the pan. You are still cooking as opposed to like a microwave meal. That's kind of a division. If it's completely pre-prepared and you just have to heat it, that's one thing versus you know, put your salad in the bowl, put the chicken in the pan.

Having to do the cooking presents opportunities for the caregiver to alter the recipe or cooking method. When I cook meal kits, I often alter the recipe to better accommodate the tastes of my family. I would substitute lamb mince for lentils, omit anaemic tomatoes, serve pasta and sauce separately, use the mandolin to cut carrots rather than peel them into ribbons, etc. Katy utilised her skills when cooking to make the meal more to her children's tastes by doing such things as cutting vegetables into smaller pieces and extending cooking times which yields crunchier roast potatoes. Amanda would alter the recipe as she cooked, using a whole egg instead of just the yolk, and measuring by eye rather than sticking to exact potions.

And Becca would make two meals out of one meal kit by adding more vegetables as she cooked.

Being able to have this level of control over the final product was important in providing competent care. Being able to smell and touch the ingredients before offering them to our families also enables us to be reassured of the quality of our care. If the food does not meet the requirements of freshness, it can be discarded. When I was cooking with Ruby and her son we discussed at length the freshness of the ricotta cheese, choosing eventually not to use it in the recipe because it smelled off.

## The Intersection of Competent Care and Care of Self

***Having all of this work done for me, feels like I am being taken care of (Willow)***

Not only are we able to decide how to present meal kit dinners to our families, but if there is an issue with the food we are provided by a meal kit company there is an easy way to obtain compensation. After Ruby had discarded the ricotta cheese, I explained the process of contacting My Food Bag and receiving compensation for a faulty ingredient, something that Ruby had not done before. This ability to seek compensation for substandard ingredients is where competent care of the family and care of self can intersect. There is a clear avenue to contact the company and have your problems listened to and addressed. This can be done with other food suppliers but in my experience of contacting takeaways and supermarkets to complain about substandard ingredients, the process is more troublesome and often not worth the effort.

In comparison, it is quick and easy to contact meal kit companies to have issues resolved. When I went to Amanda's house, she informed me she had a $75 credit because she had been sent dodgy chicken and unripe tomatoes and was missing 29 cloves of garlic. While Becca is irritated when there are issues with the delivery, she still exercises her agency in how she wishes to be recompensated:

> They're [the meal kit company] like "Oh we'll credit your account" and I was like "No, no no. You will credit my card; I don't want credit with you". Because I mix and match, I don't know when I'm going to be back using it. I just want my money back, please. I'm the annoying customer who asks those sorts of things. I was like "No I'm missing broccoli; I would like my four dollars please".

During my year-long food diary, I contacted Bargain Box 11 times because of issues with my deliveries varying from frozen coleslaw to exploded yoghurt to leaky chicken. Every issue was addressed promptly, and I would receive an apology and a credit towards my next order. This kind of care is certainly entangled with outsourcing care to the market, but I became addicted to having my needs listened to and addressed. Having your needs listened to and looked after when you are a caregiver is not the norm. There is often no provision made for the care of care givers (Tronto, 1993) especially when your relational identity as a mother relies on those in your care being cared for competently. Using meal kits supplies practical care to mothers that enables them to continue their caring work, but also contradicts discourses about good mothers being able to care competently without aid in our individualised western world.

## Mothers, Fathers and Foodwork

***Any meal that you don't cook yourself is a good meal (Jennifer)***

When I first began to explore mothers and foodwork during my undergraduate studies, many paths led to sociologist Marjorie DeVault's seminal work *Feeding the family: The social organization of caring as gendered work* (1991). Despite this research being carried out over 30 years before my work, there were many similarities between mothers of the 1980s and our experiences. Two findings that are pertinent in my meal kit work were the lack of care provided for married women, who care for their husbands as well as children and the fact that even when care was shared, one parent (usually the mother) still has to keep the entire plan for care in mind. Looking at meal kits in the light of these ideas, it becomes clear why, despite some conflicting feelings towards the practice, we continue to use them.

To explore this further, I separate cooking for pleasure and cooking as care, which is associated with as cooking as a burden. To have to cook for and feed others is a burden, even if it is happily accepted. Except for Jennifer, who claims "… I'm a shitty cook, it's not my skills", the rest of us did not express negative feelings towards cooking itself. Amanda and Katy enjoy cooking, as do Ruby and myself if we have time. Becca admits that "In our house, my husband actually prefers cooking more than me" and yet she is the one who cooks dinner every night. Using meal kits is a way to ease the burden of feeding a family, a burden that still is firmly connected to motherhood.

All of us oversaw the foodwork in our households, along with being engaged in either full-time employment, part-time employment or full-time care of preschool-aged children. Jennifer employed a nanny who cooked three days a week, but she was still responsible for shopping and planning non-meal kit meals for her children saying:

> I'm happy to cook it if I don't have to orchestrate it, or I'm happy to orchestrate it if I don't have to cook it. Just one thing.

Her husband's approach to family food is much more pleasure-based and performative, where he takes his time and enjoys the process of cooking:

> He is good at barbeque or pizzas something that we do, weekend food, where he's got 6 or 7 hours to think about it. Instead of me going "Ok it's eat out of the cupboard Sunday let's go".

Katy describes her husband as pretty hands-on in terms of child care:

> He's home at twenty past five. He does their bath time, he's pretty good, kind of has to be.

But when it comes to cooking, like Jennifer's husband he is an occasional weekend cook, and will often cook to meet his own care needs:

> He loves cooking but usually, it's the weekend, [he's like] "Arh I wanna cook some meat, I want to have a BBQ"

Amanda too, is married to someone who can cook but only does so when he wants to:

> My husband works a lot, and he can cook but he doesn't. Maybe every once in a while he makes brunch, but I can't even think the last time that he would have made a dinner because he's normally working right through dinner. He works from home now, but before he wouldn't have even been here for dinner. So that's his job, and then the kids' stuff and the food stuff is my job.

Amanda has embraced this division of labour and positioned the domestic foodwork as her job assuming that:

> …. if I was actually working full time, then my husband would have to also do some stuff in here or we'd have to hire someone. I didn't want to work. I wanted to be at home with the family. And I did that for six years. So, I do feel very much like this was my job because I left my job to come and do another job.

This sentiment was mirrored in Becca's situation. Before the children, her husband cooked more, because they both worked:

> He probably used to do a lot more, but as our dynamics have changed, now it is an assumed factor that I will cook the dinner. If there had been no notification, unless I specifically said I want you to cook, it would be pretty cruel of me to be like "Why haven't you cooked?" He would be like "Huh? Why haven't you gone to work?"

Becca goes on to say:

> There is the off chance that he might cook a weekend meal because I can't be bothered. I made him cook last weekend …. but he's definitely slower.

For these four women, there is a definite pattern emerging of partners who operate as weekend cooks, cook to meet their own needs or cook when they are explicitly asked to, but not under their own initiative.

However, when Katy and Becca had very small children or babies, their husbands did more cooking at dinner time than they do now. Becca commented that:

> Before we started cooking family meals during that lockdown [in 2020], we probably shared the cooking a bit more. We would cook after we'd got the kids to bed, and he probably did more cooking when Jack was younger because I was breastfeeding him to sleep, and he would get dinner going.

During our interview, Katy was reminded of another benefit of using meal kits that she had forgotten:

> Bargain box was a really good way to share the cooking actually. Because the issue was not him doing a recipe or me doing a recipe. It was me being able to hand over to him. Because the recipes were so well written that I could go I'm up to number two. With anything else I was cooking, in my head I'm like, this is happening, and this is happening. And it's very hard to hand over, especially when you're tired and not really speaking good England. So that was actually a really big factor when we had little, little ones.

This highlights how the transformation from woman into mother connects us more closely with foodwork and food becomes more about care for others than ourselves, a transformation that does not happen the same way to fathers. Now that the children are older Becca and Katy are cooking consistently during the week, and their husbands are occasionally cooking on weekends. Katy's story does suggest that there is the ability for meal kits to be used by those who are not typically in charge of foodwork, even if it is not realised. My own experience was different from the other women, in that choosing to use meal kits allowed me as the mother to cook less, and thus be relived of some burden of care.

### Meal Kits and my Husband - Care via Cooking

***I had to do nothing it was amazing. He did not ask one question. (Willow)***

Husbands were talked about briefly during most of our interactions, but unfortunately for my husband, he does not have the luxury of brevity. My husband has been under surveillance for the duration of my year-long food journal, if not for our entire decades-long relationship. Before beginning to use meal kits I was responsible for all the family foodwork. I cooked every night, and I shopped for our food. I enjoyed cooking before the children and was happy to do this labour. But as cooking for pleasure morphed into cooking as a burden and the children's vocal critiques of my cooking became louder, I began to feel dispirited as Jennifer articulated:

> Generally, the feedback when you're a parent around food is poor. You don't get a lot of positive feedback from anyone, maybe your partner when they look at you working away, but generally, as a parent, there's not a lot of thanks or a lot of positive

> feedback. So, it's not like something you run to excitedly, I don't skip toward the kitchen.

With the increased burden of keeping my children fed whilst creating good eaters, my desire to skip towards the kitchen also waned. So, unlike the other mothers, the care enabled by meal kits was the sharing of the dinner-time cooking burden. Seven months into my journal I wrote:

> Now that I am recording when we eat and who cooks – I feel antsy if I have cooked too much one week and he hasn't. I like it to be much more equal than it used to be.

In this short time, I had gotten used to the new arrangement of sharing the cooking. However, I also found that this equal sharing of cooking only worked if we continued to use meal kits as evidenced by these two journal entries:

> June 2021
>
> My husband is happy to cook if there is a plan but is not keen otherwise. I feel if I cling to Bargain Box meals, there is much more of a chance he will cook.
>
> Dec 2021
>
> I felt resentful of having to think about dinner when we were away. If we do not have My Food Bag, I am on my own, my husband will not think about making dinner or doing the thought work involved, we revert to type, and I did not want to do that anymore.

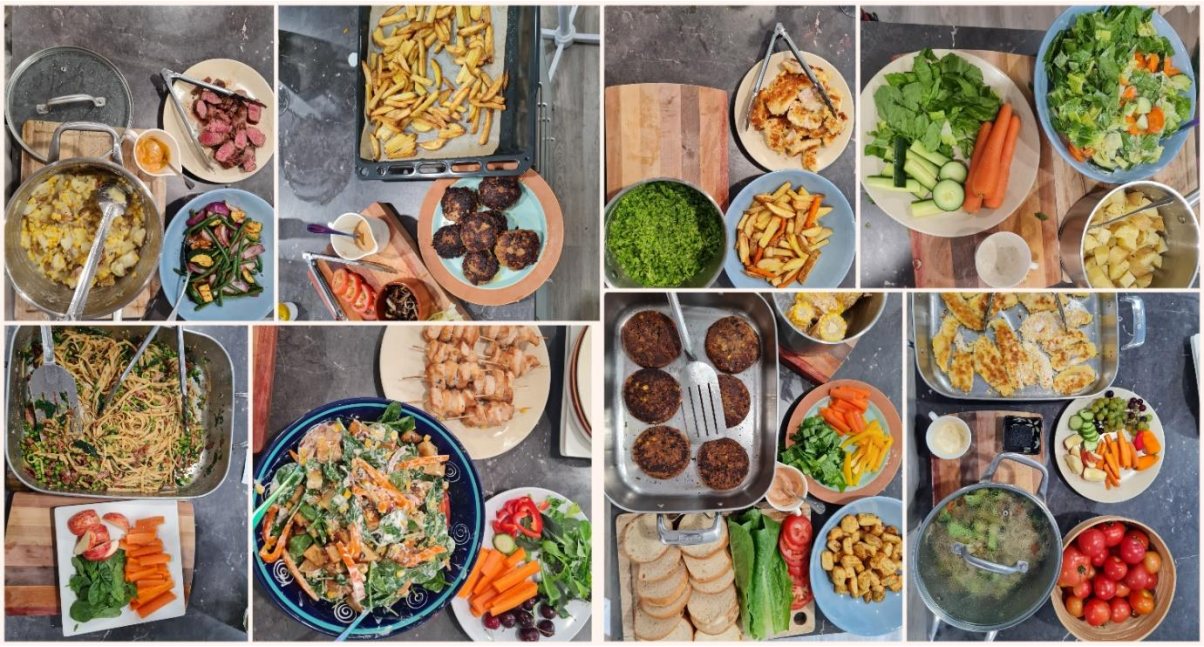
Furthermore, I noticed that my husband enjoyed cooking using meal kits. He mentioned soon after our kitchen was renovated "It's quite relaxing cooking tea, now I know where everything is. I can see everything". Some of this has to do with him having input into how our kitchen is configured, something that like foodwork, was previously my domain. But mostly I think having all the instructions and ingredients clearly laid out was relaxing for him. In the past, if he had cooked, I would be called upon to locate equipment or be consulted on cooking techniques and timing. Using meal kits gave him the agency to cook alone and relieved me of all responsibility.

However, what I noticed was that the everyday cooking my husband did was different to mine because his cooking was much more performative. My husband acted as my research

assistant, taking photographs of the meals he cooked. I noticed a difference in the pictures he would take compared to mine. In October 2021 I wrote:

> He said he wanted the meal to look good in photos. I had noticed his were much better photos than mine. He said, “What? I have a stronger work ethic”. This annoyed me and I suggested that presenting/cooking meals was a novelty for him so he was more interested in making it look good. He disagreed and said he just liked things to look good….something that he does not do with any other part of his life.

Below is a montage of my husband’s photographs and then a montage of the photographs that I took. He has presented the meals to their best advantage, clearing the debris out of the shot and making sure all elements of the meal are included. In contrast, my shots include dirty dishes, glasses of wine and dubious angles. It was one more thing I had to do before I fed the family, whereas my husband was displaying his work and was much more focused on what he had created.



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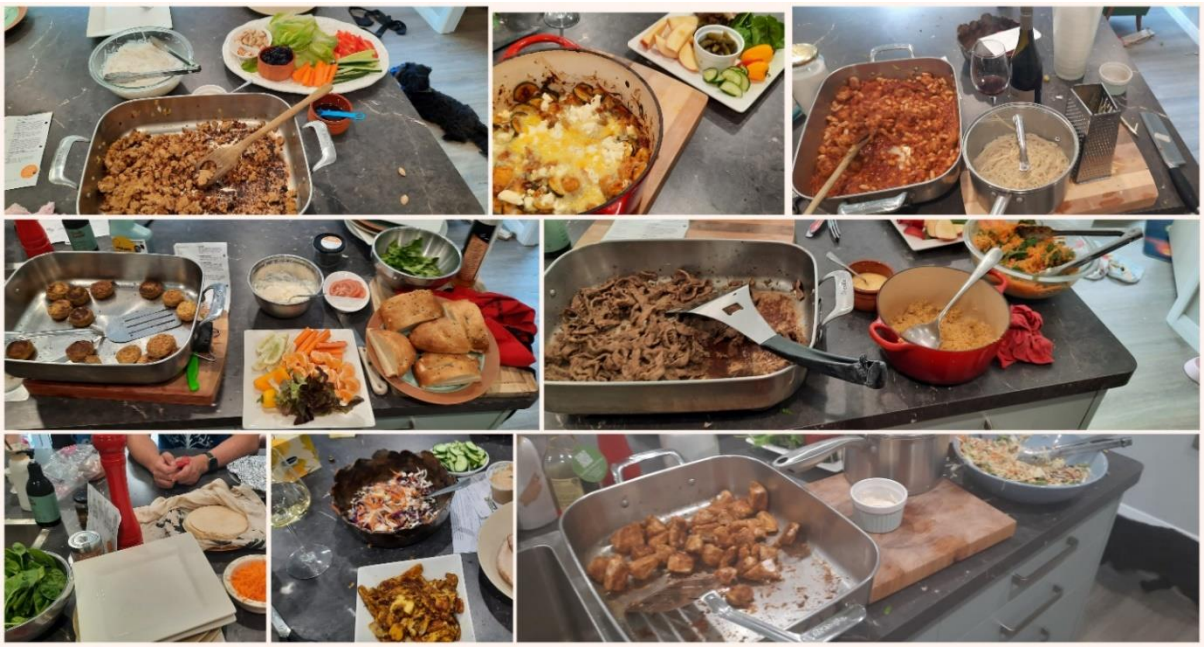

Coupled with this pride in appearance, I also noticed that my husband would become more emotionally invested in the food being eaten when he cooked, as he had "worked hard to cook dinner". When this statement was uttered, I often found myself trying not to roll my eyes, because to me making dinner using a meal kit does not even come close to hard work. Although this might be unkind of me, it highlighted how our different experiences of cooking dinner altered our view of meal kits, and what it means to cook dinner and to care. As a father his identity had not been so closely intertwined with caring the way mine had been as a mother, and what I was familiar with as part of my gendered experiences of foodwork was new to him.

One final word about my experience with my husband and meal kits is that since we are no longer so thoroughly documenting our dinners, I am again cooking more often. Much like how we reverted to type without meal kits, without the hyper-focus on dinner, we slip back into old patterns. When I ceased to think deeply about our day-to-day actions, I missed the opportunity to consider other, more equal ways of operating. Closely examining the everyday helps to highlight the ways in which we were reproducing gender inequalities and also allows me to understand my own care needs better.

### Care via Thought Work

***It's kind of worth it for the lack of stress. (Katy)***

For me, care was in the form of being able to share the cooking. This was not the experience of the other women I talked to, but there were other ways in which meal kits enabled care of self. Diminishing the amount of thought work required to feed your family is one of the major selling points of the main meal kit companies in Aotearoa. According to their websites, My Food Bag is "Taking the hassle out of dinner" (www.myfoodbag.co.nz), Bargain Box claims there will be "No hassle, no waste" (bargainbox.co.nz) when ordering with them; Hello Fresh will supply dinners that are "Family – Friendly for easy crowd-pleasers" (hellofresh.co.nz ) and using Whoop will mean that "Dinner's made easy- the hard work is done for you"(Whoop.co.nz). This pervasive rhetoric led me to expect that the people I spoke to would consider the lack of thought work involved a major benefit to using meal kits. As the words of the women below testify, my assumption was correct for once.

> It's more like, it's the thinking, they do the thinking. For me, I'm more paying for that than the delivery because I could get groceries delivered to my door. - Becca
>
> Definitely not thinking about cooking was good. - Katy
>
> The relinquishing of decision-making is very attractive, especially for someone who has to make decisions not only for herself but for all of the family members. – Willow
>
> I do like that you can make it and just it sits there, and you put it together. I guess you can do that with normal dinners too, but that takes more brainpower that you don't want to spend on thinking about that at all.- Jennifer
>
> Mostly, I just don't want to choose. I know I'm going to be cooking anyway. I don't really mind cooking, it's the choosing. – Amanda

Ruby was less enthusiastic about the removal of thought work for dinner. Her situation involving juggling food allergies and having different children to feed every week requires using meal kits very strategically depending on who she is cooking for. However, she originally tried meal kits because of the reputation of diminishing thought work saying:

> My friend suggested it [using meal kits] when I split up from my partner. She was like "Why you don't get the My Food Bags for a few weeks because then that's one less thing to make decisions about" which seemed very sensible.

She originally attempted to use meal kits as a way to alleviate thought work, however, this did not become the major form of care in her case. Throughout my experiences and interviews, I found that the care provided using meal kits was more nuanced than just not having to think about what to make for dinner.

### Care via Variety and New Ways of Eating

#### *I need more variety in my life (Amanda)*

Family mealtimes have often been a place where the preferences of husbands (Lupton, 1996; Crotty, 1995; DeVault, 1991) and more recently children (Boni, 2019) have overridden those of mothers. Because the mothers I have talked to order the meal kits themselves and choose the recipes this is a way in which they care for themselves in meeting their own food preferences. Crotty (1995, p.84) explains that "Even where people are subordinate to others - children to their parents, institutionalised people to rules, and women to men's food preferences, they actively seek to get their own food needs met". This is significant because carers often subordinate their own care needs to those whom they are caring for (Tronto, 1993), in our case more mothers to their children. This is a phenomenon Katy was familiar with:

> It's more about me about me feeding myself properly than about feeding the kids properly because I will feed the kids properly. It's about me not having the food that I should be having to be able to do my job as a parent and stuff better. Because if I eat badly my mind gets fuzzy.

Katy had found that it was she who would suffer, and by proxy the family, if she was not fed well. She had no worries about her children being fed because she understood it as her moral responsibility to keep them fed well, even if it was at her expense. Being well-fed for Katy included eating meat, something she tended not to cook:

> I've just pumped out three babies and I was breastfeeding for like five years in a row or something, or 6 years in a row. And my body just needed it [meat] like I've been

> vegetarian before and I don't really enjoy eating meat but like, I think I think we do kind of need it.

Katy liked the fact that using meal kits enabled her to cook meat, and thus care for herself more. While she believed that iron and protein were integral to the health of her family, being an ex-vegetarian herself, she was not adept at handling and cooking meat:

> But in terms of meat, it [meal kits] forced me to cook and feed them different sorts of meat. So, they didn't get phobias about meat that I might have. Because I don't like cooking meat and it forces me to eat cooked meat. I just follow it [the recipe], like I kind of tune out. Brilliant. Done.

In contrast to enforced meat eating, Jennifer and Ruby use the vegetarian meal kits, despite neither being vegetarian. Jennifer switched to using the vegetarian kits about four years ago for health reasons. Using meal kits with detailed instructions allowed Jennifer (or her nanny) to cook tasty meals without having to acquire skills in vegetarian cooking:

> The main advantage, I think is that I would never go buy tofu. I wouldn't know what to do with it. I personally don't like beans or quinoa. I don't like them, but they [meal kit companies] add enough other stuff to it that I'll eat it. It's quite tasty. I wouldn't do that by myself.

Using meal kits allowed Jennifer to care for her health needs without having to learn how to construct a good vegetarian meal from scratch.

Ruby's choice to use the vegetarian meal kits was not driven by meeting her own food needs but because of her son's wishes. However, being able to produce good-tasting vegetarian food gave her a sense of satisfaction in meeting the requirements of being a good mother, as well as creating delicious food for herself:

> I think for me that's one of the good things about My Food Bag is if I can stay the course with the instructions, I do end up with food that is actually good food. Given my "bad mother who doesn't do home baking" status, it's quite nice to sometimes put something on the table that's actually good food. I mean, I quite like trying things that

> are different. And so, I quite enjoy the variety of it. And it's quite good that you don't have to go searching for variety.

This access to variety was important. However, when not using meal kits, it was common for mothers to cook meals based on their children's wants. Amanda, for example, commented:

> I guess when I'm doing my own meal planning, I do stick more to the things that we all like.

Becca's cooking followed the same pattern:

> I think on weeks where I don't cook the food box because roughly, we do half and half, I definitely cater the meals more towards what I know the kids will eat.

I too found on the rare occasions that I was cooking without using meal kits, food tended to be child-centred meals such as toasted sandwiches, sausages or homemade pizza. But when using meal kits, I found that I was able to choose meals that I would like, without also shouldering the burden of setting out to create meals I suspected only I would like. I could share the responsibility for the choice of meals with My Food Bag:

> The last two weeks we have eaten two meals that only I have liked. Usually, I would not make meals only I like because I would feel selfish BUT because they are My Food Bag recipes, I feel no guilt about being the only one to like them, and I appreciate getting to eat something that I really loved.

I am wary of positioning meal kits as a way for mothers to meet their own food needs regardless of other members of the family. I must admit that my approach only worked in moderation, and when I continually championed my preferences over all others there were more frequent revolts at the dinner table. While using these kits does afford mothers an avenue to choose how they want to eat, this is not done without compromise. Amanda admits that they have opted for the family-friendly meal kit saying:

> I tried Food Bag and it was too fancy. The kids were like…. "It just looked weird". I mean, I would love to eat that, And I'm sure my husband would love to eat that too.

> But all of us can kind of agree on the Hello Fresh ones. If it was just me, I probably would be eating just a Food Bag. The gourmet one that comes with scallops.

Amanda chooses meal kit recipes strategically balancing her needs with those of her children in an attempt to minimise rejection of food and thus her care. The emotional toll of having food we have chosen continually rejected by the rest of my family is not worth the increase in variety we may crave. Including a meal kit provider as another actor in the meal allows us to try new ways of eating that meet our needs and also helps to cushion the rejection of care when the variety of food is rejected by other family members. Meal kits, then, provide a compromise that acknowledges both the needs of the caregiver and the care receivers.

## Rejection of and Responsiveness to Care

***I'm not trying to kill you. I'm not trying to poison you. It's actually delicious (Amanda)***

Ruby offered this advice during our interview:

> You read the parenting books and things and they say your job is to offer food, their [the children's] job is to decide whether to eat it. So long as you can divorce yourself from the fact that they might not eat it, then that's okay. That's quite hard to do though.

I agree that divorcing oneself from the rejection of food is extremely hard to do, especially if food is imagined as in Lupton's (1996, p.47) description as the "… ultimate gift; one which nourishes both the body and the psyche". If we begin to look at food as a gift of care, it becomes easier to see why there could be an emotional attachment to it being received well. Where things become more complicated is how the care receiver, in this case, children views food versus how the caregiver intends the food to be received. Lupton (1996, p. 53) explains:

> Children are not often told that they must eat because the food is a gift of love, but the resentment expressed by the mother, the meanings of rejection of the self that cling to the child's rejection of the food, demonstrates the status of the food as gift. Although

> it may not be consciously articulated, the food expresses the affection and identity of the giver, and when it is rejected, so too is the giver.

I found that these ideas lurked in the shadows of conversations and my experiences. Jennifer confided when talking about cooking:

> If you're not getting positive feedback for something, it’s not all that fun to do.

I wrote in January 2022:

> Cooking is not enjoyable when no one eats it, it feels more like an indulgent waste of time.

Ruby recounted:

> Sometimes I've made something and then they're “Oh, I don't really want it”, and I’m like “I've just stood in the kitchen for 45 minutes making it!”.

The indifference of her children to the gift of care led Ruby to explicitly explain what her feeding them meant to her, love:

> The children claim, “I don't want the dishes” and I'm like, “Do you think I want to cook dinner? No, and yet I did it because I love you”.

Amanda, who has much younger children, did not talk in terms of food being love when explaining her reaction to her children’s refusal to try her cooking, but keenly felt the rejection of care:

> I take it personally. And I feel like I'm trying, I'm trying really hard. I have a lot of things that I need to do. But I'm stopping doing all those things so that I can make something nice for us to eat and now you're gonna give me a hard time about it? No. You’re not. You can go. It used to happen a lot that they would sit down and not even try and tell me that they didn't want to eat it. I don't want to hear it. I actually don't want to hear it. If you want to sit here and tell me that you don't like what I just made, you can actually just leave and go to your room because it's so rude and disrespectful. Like, even just have one bite and say “It's not for me”. Okay.

This rejection of care is not limited to children. Katy, whose children usually eat what she prepares, encounters a different problem when she cooks without using meal kits:

> The biggest problem with being vegetarian is my husband is never full, he's like "That was lovely" and then he cooks himself something. He goes out and buys something from the supermarket and comes home with a steak, or a piece of pork or something because it's cheap. That's just insulting like I wanted to make a really nice meal. And it was enough and there were leftovers and it just didn't satisfy you.

Having established this connection between food, care and gift-giving, it is easy to understand how it becomes difficult to divorce yourself from the fact your gift of care can be so easily rejected. Interestingly, during my time using meal kits, I noticed I was feeling less rejected if meals I cooked using meal kits were not eaten. Amanda shared a similar experience, comparing her reaction to the food she has cooked on her own to a meal made using meal kits, meals that she thought had "…less of you in there":

> The dinner that I made last night, took me like 90 minutes to make, which was really unusual. And the kids were looking at it like, "I don't know about that". And I was like, "It is delicious. I have tried it, and it is so good". And I don't want to hear any more of that because, I did really pour myself into it, and I don't want to hear you haven't even tried it. I don't want to hear you don't like it because I'm gonna get upset. I'm definitely more disconnected to meal box food, more like "This is a food. Here's the food, I'm presenting it to you".

In May 2021 I wrote this analysis of my experience using meal kits. This was solely based on my own experiences, as I had yet to speak with other mothers:

> Carers divide the self to prevent becoming overinvolved with the care and lose their identity in the midst of doing care work (Kleinman, 2014). My Food Bag can be a tool used to distance myself from the care. I have the privilege of paying others to do the foodwork, so if the care receivers do not like the food, because I did not personally choose what we are consuming I feel released from the responsibility to meet all needs exactly. I can be on the same side as the care receiver, not oppositional

> to them, with the food becoming the object to be rejected or consumed. This slight distancing from the process means it is the food, not the caregiver that has been rejected, dulling the dehumanising process spoken about above.

While I still largely agree with this analysis, I have found that in my case the longer we have been using meal kits, which for our family is five times a week every week, the less effective cooking from meal kits becomes at taking the sting out of rejection. It certainly has not softened the blow to my husband when his meal kit meals are rejected. I wonder if these were the only meals you cooked would you believe, in Amanda's words, that you poured more of yourself into creating the meal?

However, it was only Amanda and myself who articulated the feeling that meal kits offered some insulation from the rejection of care. Becca was much more sanguine, being unsure if it would affect her more if her children rejected her cooking over meal kits. Becca had also admitted to coming from a long line of unenthusiastic practical cooks, where food was less important than mealtimes. In the next chapter, I will further explore this and how family relationships and our experiences of being parented influence the way we use and feel about using meal kits to feed our own families.

## Concluding Thoughts

I have found that using meal kits offers mothers the opportunity to meet their own care needs whilst balancing those of their children, with differing degrees of success. The assistance offered by using meal kits also allows the perpetuation of gendered forms of foodwork, which remains constant despite the changes to our food procurement system. Fathers engaged in foodwork much more sporadically than mothers and their attempts were often more leisurely and performative. The use of meal kits also allows mothers to offer competent care via their deep knowledge of the needs and desires of their family members which is connected to their moral responsibility of being good mothers. The care of self provided by using meal kits often comes with compromises. However, even a partial respite from the burden of foodwork challenges the self-sacrificing mother discourse, by caring for family in a way that also provides care to the caregiver. Using meal kits made everyday food work easier, but not so easy that the care provided by mothers was not competent.


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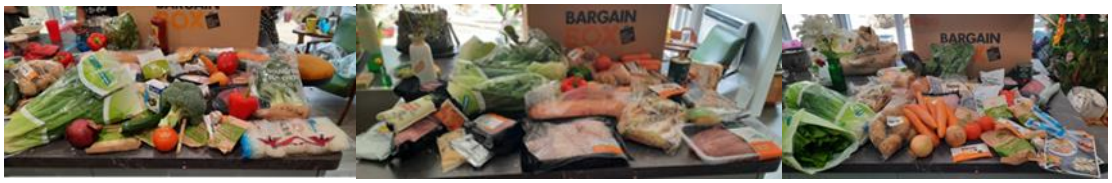
## Chapter Six

# Mothers as Good Daughters – Navigating Learnt Feeding Behaviours in a Contemporary Foodscape




My mother has haunted my thesis since the very beginning. It was from her lips that I first heard the term invisible work. As her only daughter, I was encultured into her beliefs that work done by mothers was undervalued by society but also that being a stay-at-home mother was important. When I decided to be a stay-at-home parent, it was her unwavering support that allowed me to navigate an increasingly unavailable and unpopular choice for today's mothers. In choosing this, I was also being a good daughter, complying with my mother's assessment of the world and reinforcing her values. My mother died in 2015 just as I was rediscovering tertiary education, but her teachings and influence have doggedly followed me into the world of academia. Therefore, I was not surprised when my mother had a recurring cameo throughout my yearlong meal kit food journal. She appeared so frequently that I began to wonder if by using an autoethnographic approach to my work, I was also engaging in elaborate and expensive grief therapy, wrapped in the guise of a master's thesis. I am still not convinced that the two are mutually exclusive.

Initially, I had put my mother's continued presence in my meal kit adventures down to my desire to try and understand a world without her in it. Meal kits and my mother did not seem like a good fit, their paths having never crossed. I decided that I was not a reliable witness and dismissed any connection between parents and meal kits beyond my sporadic grief processing.

Yet, when I began collating my transcripts and trawling through interviews and cooking experiences, it was not only my mother making unexpected cameos. It became apparent that the relational nature of being a mother was not confined to the generation below, but also spread into our past. Our relationship as daughters was informing how we feed our families. While I am not inferring that our experiences as children are a complete explanation for the choices we make, this is where our primary habitus is formed (Power, 1999), and the experiences in these formative years carry a weight with them that demands serious

consideration in structuring our later life practices. We learn how to feed a family, in part, by being fed in a family.

In this chapter I will explore how mothers negotiate feeding their families in the context of the contemporary foodscape and how these practices connect to attempts to be good daughters. I examine how fathers as well as mothers have influenced the foodwork practices and habitus of their daughters. I tease apart the intertwined threads of feeding, cooking and motherhood to illuminate how family morals shape some of the unresolved feelings generated by using meal kits and how mothers choose to navigate these difficulties. Finally, I look at how mothers are using meal kits as a tool to teach children how to cook and to feed themselves, thus fulfilling an important aspect of being a good mother and integrating meal kits into the primary habitus of their children.

## Mothering in a Contemporary Context

The women I talked to were the first generation to be able to use meal kits to feed their families. The technological platforms that allow us to access meal kits were in their infancy when we were. Our parents did not have to navigate parenting or feeding in a digital world.

Amanda explains:

> Now we have the capability to look up everything. We see pictures of things that other people are cooking, and people talking about what they're doing with their kids. I think it's a general societal pressure, not just food, but of all things because we're observing what other people are doing so much more than we ever have.

Being able to see what other mothers are doing, whether real or contrived for social media gives us innumerable examples of what being a good mother could mean. Mothers are hyper-aware of what we could be doing better. Amanda contrasts this access to unlimited information with her own mother's experience:

> My mom said when she was pregnant with me at 21 she didn't even like read a book. She just assumed that she would be able to figure it out and just go with the flow. This was 1979, she wasn't questioning her parenting or what I should be eating. The doctor at the hospital after she had me asked if she wanted to breastfeed, and she said, "No, thank you". So, they just wrapped her up. They didn't say anything about it at all. Her generation kind of just had to be a little bit more confident without researching.

Amanda does not necessarily see having access to more information and opinions on parenting as a good thing. I got the sense that Amanda was envious of the freedom her mother had in deciding how to mother on her own terms, without feeling guilty about her choices.

Becca also spoke about the pressure of outside opinions of parenting and how we are deeply influenced by our own childhood experiences:

> And even people, like my friend who hates children, still on occasion is "Oh I wouldn't do that". I'm like you are never going to have kids. My theory would be it's sort of like family values. It's quite ingrained in a really black-and-white way of like, you love what your family did, and so you want to do it the way you were taught to do it. Or you hated it and therefore you want everyone to do it the opposite way because "Oh, no, no, I was forced to do that and that was horrible". You kind of get that dichotomy of how it should be done, and everyone has a very loaded opinion.

Much like the loaded opinions on parenting, everyone will have opinions on eating. With the highest user penetration rate of meal kits in the world (Statista, 2023) it is fair to say that the majority of people in Aotearoa have either dabbled in using meal kits or are aware of the rough cost of the services. Leaving those of us who use meal kits more exposed to possible critique than if we fed our families in different, less visible ways. Mentioning I feed my family using meal kits has often resulted in uncomfortable interactions, where quick calculations are made, doubts are expressed, and I would find myself offering numerous unnecessary justifications for my choice. Ruby, also having experienced this commented:

> I probably don't talk to that many people about it [using meal kits] unless they bring it up first. Maybe that tells you something.

I do think this tells us something. Being identified as a mother who uses the market in such a visible way to meet family care needs, exposes mothers to loaded opinions of people who themselves are parents, children or eaters. In this technologically savvy context, where it is easy to access innumerable opinions about feeding and mothering practices, I can see how childhood experiences of being fed would seem the most reliable example of how to feed a family. After all, these early experiences have informed the innate preferences that help to structure our everyday actions as mothers. The difficulty lies in trying to reconcile how we

were fed in childhood with feeding using meal kits, which were never part of our parent's foodscape.

## Cooking, Feeding and Being a Good Daughter

In my preoccupation with my own mothering and my own mother, I had overlooked the influence of fathers on family foodwork. The previous chapter where I showed that mothers do the majority of the family foodwork, seems to support my unconscious dismissal of fathers. Furthermore, the established literature on feeding work heavily focuses on the mother's role as a feeder. DeVault (1991, p.111) suggests that "When women become mothers, their awareness of the importance of feeding and sense of responsibility for it, are often heightened by the particularly female experiences of pregnancy and childbirth". Lupton (1996, p.41) goes on the say that "Women's responsibility for the nourishing of children begins from pregnancy when women are expected to take special care with their diet to maximize the health and normal development of the foetus they carry." Feeding and motherhood are framed as linked to biological capacities. I argue that this connection between mothers and feeding lingers, even for mothers who no longer or never use their bodies to feed children. Feeding and motherhood remain inextricably linked, despite there being no need for feeding work to continue to be done by women.

Furthermore, feeding is not the same as cooking, although the two are often conflated. Feeding has a purpose, you feed in order to grow and nurture someone or something. Feeding is also strongly connected to care and hence at times also associated with burden. Cooking can be a part of feeding work, but it also is associated with pleasure and creativity. Tronto (1993, p.104) suggest that the following activities do not constitute care "the pursuit of pleasure, creative activity, production, destruction. To play, to fulfil a desire, to market a new product, or to create a work of art". I am not suggesting that there is a clear division between feeding being burdensome and cooking pleasurable, because much like motherhood and feeding the two are not so easy to separate. As we saw in the previous chapters, mothers can take pleasure in cooking, but this is often dependent on time constraints and the reception of their food, and fathers were more likely to engage in cooking that was pleasurable and performative, rather than everyday feeding work.

Because of this difference, it makes sense that learning to cook and learning to feed are two very different things. Feeding, I would argue, can encompass all foodwork, the emotional

mental, emotional, and physical labour used to feed a family. Cooking, however, involves the preparation of food and is not focused on the receiving of care, but more on the production of food. Learning the skills needed to feed people seems to be more implicit than learning cooking skills, and thus perhaps shapes our actions more unconsciously than our cooking skills do.

Hence, within foodwork, there are more aspects to being a good daughter than cooking food your parents made. It encompasses how we adapt, maintain or reject what we were taught about feeding by our parents. Within the scope of meal kits, I am reimagining being a good daughter as one who maintains or continues the family values within feeding practices, that are employed as we strive to be good mothers. This continuation of morals through changing contexts, shows what good parenting mothers received and thus can be seen as a form of respect, which Alford & Harrigan (2019) found was a key aspect of being a good daughter.

## Learning How to Feed – Our Families and Foodwork

I return to the stories told to me to examine how women are navigating simultaneously being daughters who were fed and mothers who feed within the contemporary foodscape of meal kits. Talking with my participants, I was shown that it was fathers as well as mothers who taught us how to feed. Previously I have grouped comments by theme, but in this section, it became clear after many failed formatting attempts, that these family stories are best told one person at a time. Furthermore, talk of parents was not even across interviews, for some, it was a fleeting mention, for others, it was an opportunity to share detailed stories about how they were fed in their childhood.

### Jennifer

Jennifer and I spent only one interaction together, and while she spoke the least about her parents, they were not absent altogether. Jennifer casually included this information during our talk:

> My dad, he would come up and make the Food Bag if he were here. My dad used to cook when I was a kid.

Jennifer's father would cook when he visited, even offering advice on the inexact cooking time stipulated in the meal kit recipes. Having a father actively involved in foodwork,

disrupts the idea that good mothering means feeding and cooking. Jennifer feeds her family, but she is clear about her feelings on cooking:

> I don’t feel guilty about not about home cooking because I’m a shitty cook, it’s not my skills. I don't think it's cooking as my thing.

Having a father who cooked may have allowed Jennifer to separate the identity of mother from cooking. She can then feed her family without home cooking and the associated guilt of not cooking from scratch. We did not talk enough about parents for me to offer any insight into how this pertains to being a good daughter, although her use of the word shitty to describe her cooking skills, and my knowledge of her for several years, suggests an entrenched humility in her endeavours, feeding or otherwise.

**Becca**

Becca also had a father who cooked and fed her during her childhood. Becca recalls her family situation being unusual at the time:

> I think in my house it's always been a slightly different dynamic; Dad was the stay-at-home parent, so he’s done the grocery shopping and stuff. That’s the element he’s quite comfortable in. My mum worked from when I was a pre-schooler so in my memory that's how the family was set up.

As well as her father taking on the family foodwork, Becca’s mother actively disliked cooking:

> My mum hated cooking. We continually mocked her birthday cake efforts, in sort of a light-hearted way. One of the things as we got older, we used to hassle her about [was] the waterfall cake she specialized in. [That] is what she marketed it as, [cake] with icing too runny.

Becca was not taught to cook in the family home:

> I never cooked at home, dinner was just cooked for us, even when I was in my late teens. I left home when I was 17 and even up to that point we never cooked at home. So, everything was just learned on the fly. I probably learned more about cooking off friends than off my parents.

Becca cited a family history of disliking cooking, but this did not mean that how their family was fed was similarly maligned:

> I also get the impression that my grandma, my dad's mum, was not big on cooking either, just from some of the tales told. So, I don't think there was much history in our family, certainly not a whole lot of recipes being passed down or anything like that going on. We did have a very strong culture in our house of like TV off dinner at the table everyone eats together. So, for me, that's the main thing. It's less about what's on the plate and more about the culture of everyone at the table, phones off, sitting at the dinner table having a chat about how everyone's day was. So, for me, it's less about the food more about the meal.

As I departed Becca's house after declining the 2-year-old's enthusiastic invitations to eat with the family, I could see Becca was continuing her childhood dinner ritual. The family was seated around the table no devices in sight, with a shower curtain arranged under her toddler's chair, a practical device to catch any discarded food.

Becca explained that while cooking was not important in her family, learning and achievement were:

> I mean, we definitely grew up in a house where academics was high value. There was probably a bit of pressure in that. I remember mum saying when I was older, that it was actually quite unusual because both my parents had degrees.

Becca, holds a PhD, so along with the family dinnertime ritual she is maintaining good daughter status via achievement. This academic habitus is also clear in the way she talks to her young children about nutrients and why we need to be good eaters. It makes sense then, that Becca's concern with using meal kits was not with the cooking, she even preferred the quicker more pre-prepared options available from Whoop:

> It was definitely quicker. It was nice, I'm not gonna lie. It was nice, it was quick and it was nice.

For Becca, the places of friction were expense and appearing lazy because of her stay-at-home status while using meal kits. While the option of meal kits was not available to her parents, Becca thinks that her parents would not have been keen on using meal kits:

> I think that the saver side of my parents wouldn't have allowed that to happen. That would have been [because] my parents were very careful with money.

Becca integrates these aspects of feeding into using meal kits by only purchasing the kits at a discounted price and putting time and energy into finding the best deals, demanding cash refunds and bulking meals out with extra vegetables:

> I just like the bargains, but it's complicated. We're in a position where we could probably get a full-price box every week, it would mean we pay a little less of our mortgage, but it wouldn't break the bank. But at the same time, I just feel it's wasteful because I know how much I would spend roughly in a grocery shop, otherwise. Although we do pick up little bits and pieces, I do a bulk shop for the week with my meals planned if we are not doing a food box, so I know how much it would cost me to buy a week's worth of meals. I know that the food box does cost more.

Motherhood, cooking and feeding are separated in Becca's past, so her focus has been on adjusting the way she feeds her family using meal kits to align with feeding her family in a thrifty and diligent way.

### Amanda

For Amanda, food, cooking and motherhood were also not as intertwined as the dominant good mother discourse would suggest. As discussed in Chapter Four, Amanda's mother tended to cook plain food and cater to her fussy daughter. However, unlike Becca, Amanda did have a parent who was an adept cook, her stepdad being a chef:

> I don't know what I would have done in my life without the influence of my stepdad broadening my horizons quite massively and making me appreciate new flavours and

> boldly try new stuff. I guess I'm trying to instil that in my kids without being a fancy professionally trained chef.

With two distinct styles of how to feed a family to choose from in her formative years, Amanda was able to pick and choose how she could approach feeding her own family. Amanda developed a habitus that included a wider variety of ideas about what was possible when feeding a family. Her grandmother also offered different ways to feed that influenced Amanda's practice:

> I remember my mom said that my grandma who had four kids at 26, made something different for everyone because nobody really liked the same stuff. She had a workaholic husband, and she was doing all the things and making different dinners for everyone because they didn't want the same thing. We're not doing that.

Amanda has chosen to reject the way her grandmother fed her children, but interestingly it is her grandmother's food she cooks for comfort:

> Not my mother's recipes, more like my grandma's recipes, like mac and cheese. Which it's hilarious because my recipe has morphed so much over the years and it's nothing like hers at all. But I still send her a photo when I'm making as it makes me think of her.

There is a positive connection between her grandmother and cooking and her stepdad and cooking, that is not present with her mother. However, Amanda still occasionally embraces taking the path of least resistance when feeding her family, much like her mother did. Amanda, however, chooses to use convenience foods rather than, simple plain cooking, to care for herself and manage the burden of feeding:

> [There's] so much that we carry around [like] wishing that I could make healthier food. And, you know, using chicken stock from the supermarket, I could be making my own chicken stock. I could, but I can also get it in a packet, and it's really good… You know, I've got chicken fingers in the bag. I definitely can make chicken fingers from scratch. But those ones, I could just put them in the oven for 20 minutes, and everybody loves them. So yeah, I guess that's, you know, that's a break for me.

Amanda's use of meal kits balances the ways she was fed as a daughter, rejecting some practices and struggling with the importance of giving herself a break in a world where mothers can easily be judged for doing so. Being able to disentangle motherhood, cooking and feeding seems to lessen the conflict felt using meal kits, and having exposure in childhood to numerous examples of how feeding can happen may assist this separation.

**Willow**

Recently my daughter brought home a social science questionnaire for homework. She was asked to create a cultural suitcase composed of family stories, by answering a list of questions. One question asked for a story about why a particular dish is important to you or your family. This was a question that hit a sensitive spot for me. In November 2021 I wrote:

> I don't know why I find it so important to cling to having a family recipe, I think it is a tangible cultural marker that you can cling to and re-make. My brother's family and mine celebrated my deceased mother's birthday in October and we made food that reminded us of her, not necessarily things we wanted to eat, or the kids would eat, just stuff that made us think of her. The making was more important than the eating. I do so many other things for my kids that they will remember –but it is the food that I am obsessed with, the failure as a mother not having a special meal they love.

It was not until I began cooking other people's food in the form of meal kits that I noticed the lack of my own food. After using meal kits for over three years, I no longer remember what I used to cook for my family. It was not my mother's food, her dislike of cooking was evident in the dishes she made. It is hard to understand why I was so focused on having a special family meal when this was not the way I had been fed. I was raised as a vegetarian, and my parents were raised in 1950s Aotearoa, in which meals focussed heavily on meat. The food we each fed our children had drastically changed from one generation to the next. And yet the idea of a good mother being able to produce a special family dish laden with meaning had made a home in my brain.

What I had ignored until now was my father's role in developing my connection to cooking and feeding. Focusing on the stories of Amanda, Becca and Jennifer and their fathers' influence on foodwork, made me realise I had erased my father from my narrative. While cooking was a burden to my mother, it was a creative outlet for my father. As I grew older and more confident in cooking, my father and I would plan elaborate meals for family

occasions pouring through *Cuisine* magazines for inspiration. Along the way, I think my ideas of feeding and cooking morphed into the same thing. My mother fed us, but my father enjoyed cooking. I enjoyed cooking until it became a burden linked to feeding and care.

I exist in a conflicting space where I understand my mother's disengagement from cooking, but remember the joy felt when creating my own elaborate meals. When I can combine creative cooking with feeding, I am less conflicted, but my children consistently enact their agency in getting their own food needs met, i.e. they do not eat what I cook.

Using meal kits has enabled me to occupy this conflicting space more comfortably. While at first, it was confronting when I considered the erasure of my food, using meal kits has eased the burden of feeding that my mother felt (and I had absorbed as a child) and allowed me to maintain a level of excitement in being a foodie I cultivated later in life while cooking with my father. To fully enjoy these benefits I did need to let go of the idea that a good mother has a special family meal. This was easier said than done when my daughter chose a concoction created by my mother involving rotisserie chicken, soy sauce and chicken noodles to describe as her special family dish.

**Katy**

For Katy, the intermingling of cooking, mothering and feeding works. There are two important factors in this, one is that Katy's children are not fussy eaters, they will consume the care she provides via food and the other is that of all the mothers I spoke to Katy had the strongest cultural connection to food.

Katy states that "Food's just always been a really big part of our life". In Katy's family, food acts as a connection to both her husband's and her cultural heritage. Katy's husband is of French ancestry, and her own family has a connection to France. Visiting France illuminated some culturally specific practices for her:

> I lived in France for not very long, like six weeks. But I was like, "Ah, now this and this and this makes sense about my family". Like how they eat and how they talk, and just some little subtle things. One of those things is he [my husband] eats, really slowly and is obsessed with food. And he talks about food, and he's quite particular about the details and stuff.

Katy's own family connection to French culinary tradition seems to have survived the migration to the antipodes largely intact:

> My mum's a really good cook, and my grandmother is a pretty good cook as well. She's French, but she was born and grew up in New Caledonia. Which they think is like this little island off side of France. And a lot of the extended family were in France.

Good food and family are intrinsically linked in Katy's experience. Using meal kits did not threaten to overwhelm this connection and Katy uses meal kits as a tool offering respite from thought work. Furthermore, meal kits taught Katy about feeding herself better. Using meal kits has been a positive experience for Katy, not threatening her identity as a good mother and adding to her cooking skill set, though it must be emphasised this is about feeding herself not feeding her family, something she could easily accomplish alone.

In feeding her family, however, Katy still uses strategies she experienced as a child:

> I'm quite hardcore. I cut them off. I'm like, no it's quarter past 4 you're done, you're gonna have to wait now. Because mum used to cut me off. It works, I'm quite a good eater as well.

Katy seems able to enjoy the novelty and respite meal kits offer, whilst being secure in her connection to good food, and identity as a mother. She is a good daughter who is keeping the family culture relevant through her feeding practices of prioritising fresh food and cooking. Recently after a medical event, Katy suggested her parents utilize meal kits, as a way to help her mother:

> I was trying to get my parents onto it. Because my dad can cook an egg and my mum's not well this year. She had a heart attack three days into this year, like a big one. And suddenly, I'm like, you need to learn to cook. Even if it's a little bit. And no they won't yet. They still see it as like something unnecessary and expensive. And I'm like actually, sometimes it evens out. So, it's kind of worth it for the lack of stress. I'm like, "Mum, you're not really supposed to be moving, like you shouldn't be doing your thing in the kitchen even though makes you happy."

Just as I rolled my eyes at my husband thinking cooking using a meal kit was hard work, for those who regularly cook for pleasure, like Katy and her mother, using meal kits challenges

the happiness generated from being in the kitchen. Katy navigates cooking as a pleasure and feeding as a burden, by only utilising meal kits when she is parenting solo or has an especially hectic week, but convincing her mother of the value of this has proven difficult, possibly because her mother has no children that need feeding. Katy is both being a good daughter by trying to protect her mother but also challenging her mother's source of pleasure, by introducing meal kits.

**Ruby**

Ruby, like Katy, did not mention her father in connection with the family foodwork, but she did paint a vivid picture of how involved her mother was in creating food for the family:

> I remember summers, where mum seemed to be in the kitchen all the time. And I feel really bad because I accidentally threw out her jam pan. I might have made jam once. In summer she would bottle fruit, she would make jam, like several types of jam. We would go out and buy fresh fruit from the orchard. So that's the picture of a mother I have in my head somebody who literally makes scones and the jam.

Ruby has never been the kind of mother who makes the jam and the scones, but this was the example of how a mother feeds the family she had grown up with. Ruby is working on reconciling how she was parented to how she now parents, a task that is not always straightforward. Context is an important factor in this reconciliation, something that often gets ignored. While Ruby's mother did work part-time, it was not on the same scale as the job Ruby currently has:

> I have this huge job, which evidently my children don't understand…. I'm always having meetings or having to work. After dinner, it's like, now I just need to do this. Which last week backfired on me horribly, because I quickly did something. But I made a mistake, which doesn't very often happen, touch wood.

Ruby is actively trying to accept what she can and cannot achieve, but the experiences of her childhood still loom large in how she feels buying convenience food, using meal kits and not making jam, or pudding. Furthermore, Ruby is often reminded of the differences in how her mother feeds her family when she visits as her mother still managers to produce home baking and desserts:

> When we go to mum's she'll be like, I have made an apple pie or some kind of pudding. And I'm like "Hmmmmm." [sounding uncomfortable]

Ruby was also initially uncomfortable with the expense associated with meal kits, despite being able to afford the price. Speaking of her family meals growing up, it was evident that cost was a big factor in what was eaten:

> We were quite a mince-heavy family; I think because mince was cheap. So, meatballs or meatloaf or scotch eggs with sausage meat. And when we got a bit older, we had quite a lot of stir-fries. Mum would very often make something into stir fry. Not really sure what cut of meat she was using. She also did a lot of casseroles. I don't like casseroles [whispered] it just seems to me to be overcooked food, it's not a lot of taste and it's just all mush. So, I refuse to cook casserole.

When using meal kits Ruby is simultaneously cooking differently from her mother and feeding her family differently. When not using meal kits, Ruby thought that the meals she made were similar to her mother's cooking but with less meatloaf and scotch eggs, no dessert, and definitely no casseroles. Ruby's model of a mother was so entwined with cooking, that even though Ruby does cook from scratch half of the time, the combined departure from cooking this way when using meal kits caused unease and guilt. It makes it hard to envision yourself as a good daughter when you perceive the divergence between how you were fed as a child and how you feed your children.

### Meal Kits and Cooking – Preparing our Children to Feed Themselves

As I stirred garlic and bacon together in a Le Creuset pan in Amanda's kitchen, I asked about teaching children to cook. Her answer surprised me. Amanda was adamant that today, you really did not need to know how to cook because there were plenty of options via readymade meals and food delivery options. Amanda was not fazed about her children learning particular cooking skills. However, part of being a good mother is equipping your children with the skills they will need to survive in the world, and being able to feed yourself is imperative to survival. While we may be unintentionally teaching our children how to feed families and informing their own habitus, there is an intentional dimension to teaching children to cook. Below I look at how using meal kits is integrated into teaching cooking skills, skills that may no longer be necessary for a contemporary foodscape where how we understand cooking is changing (Trubek, 2012).

Jennifer and Ruby have older teenagers, and ensuring they could feed themselves before leaving the family home was a pressing concern. Because Ruby cooks meal kits with her son, she was optimistic that he would be able to transfer his meal kit skills to creating food solo, saying:

> I feel like Hamish would be able to cook things. I hope so. I feel like if I was to give him a recipe book, and, even if he just kind of marked a few things, I feel like he'd be able to do that. The other two would be useless, but that's because they barely come into the kitchen.

At the time I talked to her, Hamish had only once cooked a meal kit alone. When I visited, he did most of the work, but he also liked to check in with his mum throughout the process. Ruby saw cooking with meal kits as an easily accessible training ground for being able to follow a recipe, the extra steps of buying ingredients and portion sizes and indeed deciding what to cook would need to be introduced later.

Jennifer was considering a different approach to preparing her son for university life and having to feed himself:

> Because Tyler's 18, I'm wondering about whether we get the Bargain Box just for a month just so he learns how to cook. Make him cook it every week, every day. I am worried about that…I'm going to try and think on that for Tyler before he goes away to university. It would be good if he can do something even if it was just out of a box.

Jennifer acknowledged that cooking out of a box is not the same as cooking from scratch. However, she feels that at least having these skills is preferable to being ignorant of the cooking process. Being able to use a meal kit was an infidelity better option than only being equipped to order Uber Eats because consuming meal kits helps to create a middle-class omnivorous habitus.

I too had made a half-hearted attempt at teaching my children how to cook with meal kits in June 2021 I wrote:

> We have instigated a new rule where each child has to help make dinner once a week.

This rule did not last long, and my children helped only once or twice. My daughter made dinner by herself once using the meal kit, but it took twice as long and was much more stressful than cooking myself. Using the meal kits as a learning tool, for me, negated their

reduction in thought work and ease. I suspect as my children near the age of departure, I too will feel more pressure to perform my good mother duties and be sure they can feed themselves well and can thus be good children who reflect on me as a good mother.

Katy and Amanda's children are even younger than mine, so they use meal kits more as an activity to do together, rather than a serious teaching tool, although there will always be learning occurring. When we were cooking at her house, Amanda's son was going to help us, until he found out that a movie was on offer. At this young age, cooking is still seen as a fun activity rather than a way to feed yourself because parents will assume this care. During lockdown, meal kits morphed from care of self for Amanda to a necessary activity:

> When lockdown came, I was like "Right you can help me cook dinner today, you can help me cook dinner tomorrow." And it became a bit of a thing where, you know, two or three nights a week I had a little helper in the kitchen with me. And I had so much time, so much time, and I needed things to do.

Katy also occasionally includes her children in preparing meal kits, although as I also found, including children in the process negated some of the benefits of using meal kits and increased the stress:

> I've had weeks where I've been "Hey, kids, here's the recipes, choose one each and you can help me". And then I've gone, "Ah shit I should have taken that one out because that is not child friendly", but I didn't even think of it until afterwards. And it's worked, they've got enthusiastic about helping, but then I have to allow like an extra hour or half hour. And it's quite stressful cooking with Rose because she's all in, she's like "I'm helping" and "I'm like, no, no, no, no, not this one", "I'm helping, here's the stool". And by helping she means sample everything- "that's raw meat, don't do that."

Outside of meal kits, Katy is teaching her two older children to cook from scratch:

> Rowan does my pavlovas and meringue and stuff. That's their thing. And Liam, it's apple tarte tatin. Because I wanted them each to have something that they were good at as their thing. Because their families are really about food and particularly French stuff because we both have French backgrounds.

Katy's cultural connection to food means that just using meal kits when teaching her children to cook would not adequately convey their European heritage. The omnivorousness of meal kits, while appealing for the variety does not contain a strong link to one particular culinary culture.

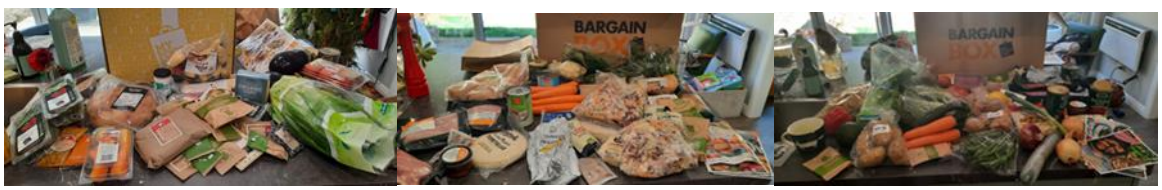
Becca who has the youngest children, has not yet let them loose in the kitchen much:

> I think in the future we will make efforts to teach them to cook, but I cannot trust my children yet. We also have gas cooking, so you know. Mainly because I don't trust them with knives, so they bake with me regularly instead.

Becca is challenging the approach her parents took and intends for her children to have some knowledge of how to feed themselves before they are away from their family but whether this entails meal kits or not is yet to be seen.

## Concluding Thoughts

In this chapter, I have drawn out the connections between being a good daughter and a good mother and how our habitus as formed as daughters have helped to shape our relationship with feeding families and using meal kits. There are many ways to be a good daughter within foodwork, and this is dependent on how daughters choose to reproduce or reject family morals. However, the element of family influence needs to be considered holistically, understanding that reasons behind actions are complex and include the intersection of many factors such as class, experiences, gender, relationships and education. The influence of fathers on feeding proved to be a useful mechanism of disruption in the mother, cooking, and feeding entanglement, showing that fathers also teach us how to feed families. Lastly, as mothers pass knowledge and cooking skills onto the next generation, they are inculcating meal kits into their children's habitus. Along with creating good eaters in the present, we are also attempting to create future good daughters and sons who continue our morals and feeding practices if they become good parents themselves.



## Chapter seven

# Conclusion


I often find conclusions hard. What could possibly be left to be said? So just as I have done throughout this thesis, whenever doubt strikes, I look to my own experience to see if some introspection can shed light on how to conclude my journey and my thesis. Almost three years after starting my food journal the way I use meal kits has changed. I still use meal kits to feed my family five nights a week, however, we have moved from Bargain Box to My Food Bag because I wanted a change. The Bargain Box meals had become a bit monotonous, and I wanted to stay excited about the food. When I first started using Bargain Box there was no choice in the recipes I would receive each week, now with My Food Bag, I have 25 recipes to choose from every week. When the choice of recipes was first introduced in 2021, I used to choose all the meals for the family and would sometimes feel slighted if my choices were rejected. Now one family member, on a weekly rotation, gets to choose all the recipes for the week, a system that is working well. I do not think that my children are eating more food, but I am definitely less stressed about it than I was and there are very few explosive dinnertimes now. Understanding the pressures put on mothers to create good eaters and be good mothers has made me less likely to internalise my children's failure to eat as a personal failure. I no longer make a 'scurvy platter' every night for the children because my children were not eating it consistently and it became more unnecessary work and unnecessary waste. My children understand the need to eat fruit and vegetables, so I am empowering them to be autonomous moral subjects who choose to eat well. My children have also accepted this is how we eat now; we use meal kits and they have become entirely familiar. I now cannot fathom feeding my family without meal kits.

While meal kits have become our new normal, I am aware of how I could underestimate the work it took for me to get to this point. Without the thorough documentation I have amassed as part of this project it would be easy to think that integrating meal kits into my family life was as simple as purchasing a product. From my perspective now, I could look back and

think “What was the big deal, Willow? It was fine!” But what I have learned from the constant and careful engagement with the everydayness of feeding my children is, that using meal kits has become fine because I made it fine. I worked hard, and this work was often invisible. Over the course of my project, I struggled with meeting the ideals of being a good mother, I worked at overcoming the shame I felt at using meal kits, and I began to understand how much pressure there is on mothers to be the guardians of health, to nurture through food, and to be the ones doing the foodwork. I had to separate pleasure and burden and take pleasure in burden where I could. And I do take more pleasure in the new food procurement system than I ever did in the old one. I still get excited every Monday as the new recipes are released on the My Food Bag app. I sit with whoever’s turn it is to choose the recipes for the week, wondering what they will pick, and feeling happy they are enacting their agency in choosing.

I now understand how being a woman and a mother ties me more closely to care work and foodwork than it does to my husband. My husband still does not cook as much as me, but yesterday as he was loudly praising himself for doing the washing, exclaiming “What a good husband I am…”, he stopped mid-sentence then wryly added, “For doing the bare minimum of housework that I helped to create”. My husband and I are both now noticing the importance of everyday actions.

## Noticing the Everyday

I have spent the last three years noticing my own life, and to say autoethnography as a methodology was important to my research would be an understatement. I cannot think of another way I would have been able to delve into the everyday mundanity of feeding a family without it. I had thought that once I had finished my food journal, the autoethnographic part of my work was over. What I found was that everything in my life became part of the work: my children’s homework, my childhood memories, every fight over dinner, every missed opportunity for my husband to cook, and my own stubborn blindness. But this incessant engagement had provided me with an invaluable insight into the often ignored everyday.

Without creating a deeper understanding of my own experiences, my appreciation of the importance of the subtle wording and themes expressed by my participants may have been overlooked. All the nuance and tiny details that together reveal a picture of what was happening as we fed our families came from using autoethnography. However, I needed the

input of other mothers to differentiate the patterns from my own experiences and enrich the conversation about the myriad of ways mothers were working to use meal kits to feed their families. Furthermore, including cooking in my participant observation allowed me to see mothers in their domain and was invaluable in understanding what was important to them when caring for their families. I was able to see the nuance in a group of women who shared so many attributes but told very different stories of feeding their families using meal kits.

Noticing the everyday is what makes the ordinary appear visible and brings infinitesimal and almost invisible subordination into the light. When the ordinary, the mundane and the everyday is illuminated, we begin to see how it is constructed, we understand how cultural meanings, our social experiences and our own subjectivity collide in the everyday choices we make when feeding our families with meal kits. We see what is morally important to us, how our habitus shapes our choices, how dominant discourse about goodness filters into our consciousness, and how we strive to care competently for our children. When the ordinary is teased apart into its complex and often contradictory parts, we are given an opportunity to understand our actions, and an opportunity to change or challenge things that can seem permanent.

## Persistent and Enduring Nuance

The recent literature on foodwork and mothers is all about adding nuance to persistent and enduring themes. My work continues this theme, adding a fraction more understanding about how and why mothers remain responsible for the majority of foodwork, findings that remain relevant after over 30 years. My work intensely focuses on the very small, very mundane task of feeding families using meal kits. But in this minute and quotidian space the enduring continuation of gendered foodwork, dominant good mother discourse and the quickly changing contemporary foodscape are brought together. The often-hidden experiences of trying to be a good mother are revealed, centred around the perpetuation of the family meal that is enabled by the use of meal kits. Through looking at meal kit use; we see how mothers navigate maintaining their relational identity and moral sensibilities when feeding families. Foodwork is shown to be a site of good daughtering and the influence of fathers on how we learn to feed families is inserted into what is often considered a space of mothers and daughters. Focusing on how mothers integrate a new food provisioning system into their everyday, highlights the importance of providing moral care in a middle-class milieu, where striving to be good mothers and daughters is a more pressing concern than challenging the

subtle subordination of mothers to their family and the perpetuation of a gender order that intrinsically links women to food.

## No Longer Unfamiliar

Culinary Historian Laura Shapiro regards meal kits as inferior to cooking using family recipes claiming “It’s not the same. It’s not ours. It doesn’t have our family sentiments behind it” (Severson, 2016). I argue that mothers are working to make meal kits ours, to make the unfamiliar familiar. Women are using meal kits in ways that imbue family morals, provide competent care, and care for themselves. We are using meal kits as a tool to create good eaters so we can be good mothers. It may not be the same food that our parents made, but family sentiments are about much more than food, they are about feeding and care.

The stories of the everyday that I have written about may lack sharp moral boundaries and are often contradictory, simultaneously oppressive and resistant, but they tell a story about what is morally important to each of us as we constantly work to understand, preserve, reconcile and challenge our identities as good mothers and daughters. Amid all of these contradictions and negotiations of being a good daughter and a good mother, sit the use of meal kits. When looked at closely, using meal kits shows how changing one thing about how mothers feed their families can illuminate aspects of family morals, gendered foodwork and care that had lain dormant and undiscussed, hiding in plain sight in the everyday work of feeding a family.

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