

# Defining Food Agency: An Ethnographic Exploration of Everyday Home Cooking Practices

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## Introduction

### Looking at cooking, and why it matters:

- Retaining control over the **health** of individuals' meals and diets.<sup>1-6</sup>
- Creating and maintaining social **connections**.<sup>1,7</sup>
- Transmitting cultural and traditional **knowledge, skill, and craft**.<sup>1,7</sup>
- Maintaining a connection with an activity that "made us **human**."<sup>1,8</sup>

### Key underlying premises of this research:

- Cooking in America is not in "decline," it is in **transition**.<sup>9,10</sup>
- One's relationship with cooking is rarely **static**.<sup>9,10</sup>
- Everyday cooking practices are **significant, revealing, and complex**.<sup>7,9,10</sup>

## Research Questions

**Introductory Question:** How can food agency be defined within the context of everyday cooking practices?

**Main Question:** How can the everyday practices of home cooks reveal a *spectrum* of food agency capacities?

**Sub-question:** How do structural barriers in the food environment both empower and constrain a home cook's expressions of food agency?

## Methods

I pursued these questions using an explorative ethnographic approach built on the following methods:

### Videotaped Kitchen Visits (5 newly filmed + 22 previously filmed, $n=27$ )

- Inexperienced Cooks ( $n=3$ )
- Intermediate Cooks ( $n=21$ )
- Experienced/Professional Cooks ( $n=3$ )

### Participant Observation ( $n=5$ )

### Semi-structured Interviews ( $n=5$ )

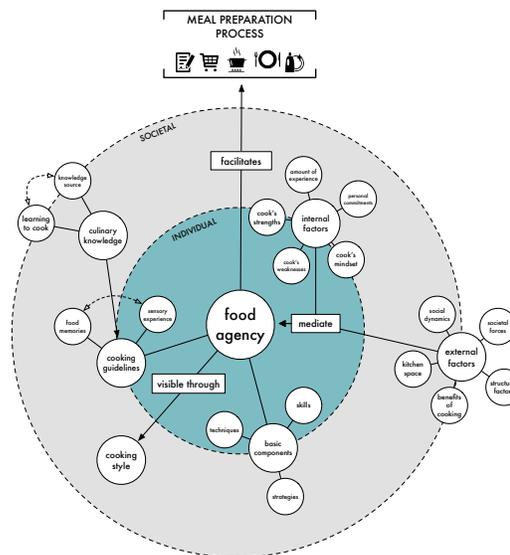
### Qualitative Coding and Analysis (with ATLAS.ti 7)

- Open coding:** explore the data to condense into analytic categories, or *codes*.
- Axial coding:** review, examine, condense, and connect initial codes; focus on causes, consequences, conditions, interactions, strategies, processes, etc.
- Systematic coding:** conceptualization of the broader interaction of related codes through creating a chart or visual schematic (see map, at right).<sup>11</sup>

## Conclusions and Future Directions

- Food Agency, *defined*: a broad and dynamic construct concerned with the capacity of individuals to meet purposeful goals and aims surrounding the process of meal preparation.
- To understand food agency along a fluid *spectrum*, each thematic component (e.g., the nodes of the concept map) must be viewed along a separate low-to-high gradation. I have found that home cooks of all experience levels possess the basic scaffolding for food agency, but the degree to which one develops fluency or mastery in each area is a product of personal experience, and thus is highly varied from cook to cook. In sum, food agency is not a static entity that an individual simply possesses, but rather a responsive construct that one can develop to varying forms and extents.
- The *structural factors* associated with food agency (e.g., time, money, mobility) certainly shape individuals' meal preparation processes, yet the most hindering barriers appear to be psychological in nature. However, being well-versed in the basic components of food agency (e.g., cooking skills, techniques, and strategies) does seem to allow a fluid progression throughout meal preparation, as well as enhanced self-efficacy towards partaking in the act of cooking more generally.
- The next steps for this research, then, will be to consider food agency from an educational stance. If individuals are taught certain basic components—knife skills, cooking techniques, and organizational strategies—within the context of this broader systems-oriented model, could this aid their overall progression towards developing greater food agency?

## Mapping the Results



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Notes: Food Agency Concept Map designed by Maria R. Carabello using OmniGraffle, a concept mapping program.  
"Meal Preparation Process" icons shown on concept map were authored by designers at FlatIcon.  
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