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# Under pressure – learning from the culinary and alimentary practices of Anglo-French couples for cross-national comparison

## Introduction

- 1 Cross-national comparisons of social arrangements and practices are usually predicated on questions around convergence and divergence (typically through large scale surveys repeated over time), or global trends versus qualitative differences (through ideal-typical construction and contrasts at one point in time). Both seek to assess the ‘stability’ or ‘enduring’ character of the representations, institutions, conventions and practices investigated, or conversely the erosion of their underlying principles (de Saint Pol, 2006; Bildtgaard, 2010; Fischler *et al.*, 2008; Mäkelä *et al.*, 1999; Warde *et al.*, 2007).
- 2 At the same time, social scientists have long referred to a variety of forces and tensions shaping culinary and eating practices – including healthism, the search for convenience, the progress of commodification, etc. (Warde 1997). Claude Fischler for example approaches ‘culinary systems’ as systems of regulation constructed historically which allow eaters to cope with food-related anxieties along several dimensions (Fischler, 1990). In such studies, concerns are with the ‘exacerbation’ of such pressures, what J-P. Poulain refers to as the multiplication of contradictory ‘must-do’ injunctions (2002: 71), and the risk of erosion of these regulatory systems.
- 3 This paper reports on couples, some living in France, some in England, where one partner is French and the other British, using their experiences of adjustment and change in food consumption consequent upon setting up home together as a lens for comparative analysis. We adopt a notion of alimentary and culinary practices as shaped by, and as responses to, contradictory social pressures and explore the implications for the kind of conceptual objects constructed for cross-national comparison. We propose to shift the focus of analysis from systems of regulation to the dynamics of practices in different culinary and alimentary environments. Understanding culinary practices and environments through such a lens means that cross-national comparison does not focus on uncovering and contrasting ideal-typical wholes with a particular consistency or logic, but instead looks at significant sequences or patterns of practices, at sources for their consistency and their contrasts and polarisations. The notion of contrast emerges as a key notion for understanding practices and dispositions in a cross-national and dynamic perspective.
- 4 The choice of France and Britain for this comparison was motivated by the initial hypothesis that the French and the British culinary and alimentary practices are exposed to very similar pressures and yet that the repertoires and resources available for coping with these pressures are markedly different. We examine this idea through the positioned and situated experience and practices of Anglo-French couples, as we take them to be particularly keen carriers of some of the pressures on contemporary food practices.
- 5 The things that partners in cross-national couples deem legitimate to criticise in the food culture of their partner’s country of origin are especially significant because partners in cross-national couples are usually wary of stereotyping. First, despite generally espousing features of cosmopolitanism – especially impatience with ‘fixed’ ways and a keenness to experiment and enjoy new foodways – they can experience discomfort. Secondly, they tend to assess foodways according to their merits, as for example more or less healthy, enjoyable, educational or proper, rather than simply in terms of personal likes and dislikes and are thereby particularly strong carriers of Poulain’s ‘must do’ injunctions. A double relation to food – through disposition

and through assessment – is probably widespread, but is thrown into particular prominence in the organization of everyday life for cross-national couples, and especially so for the partners subject to geographical re-location.

6 Moments of shift and break as well as perceived gaps in culinary and alimentary arrangements provide further significant signposts for cross-national comparison. We examine how Anglo-French couples, when forming a new commensal unit (Sobal et al., 2002), came under particular pressure at some specific moments and in relation to specific areas of provisioning and eating. We focus on moments of shifts in cooking linked to new demands impinging upon the diets of the couple and family (weight-loss diets and parenthood, for example). We also examine lunch arrangements, for although lunch is not usually taken as a joint meal, it strongly shapes other aspects of commensal organisation and can be a source of tensions and differences. These two features of the experience of cooking and eating are well suited for our purpose because patterns in France and Britain have traditionally been different.

7 In the next section we discuss the methods employed in our study of experiences of Anglo-French couples. There then follows a section concerned with the relationship between arrangements for cooking, how these change with the passage of time, and what consequences they have for what household members eat. In the fourth section we examine lunch arrangements and the scheduling of meals. The paper concludes with a discussion of the implications of the research findings for the conduct of comparative analysis.

## Methods

8 We recruited 14 Anglo-French couples living in metropolitan areas, 7 in North West England (hereafter NWE) and 7 in the Ile de France region (hereafter IDF), through our work networks (although none of the persons interviewed was known to us previously), through the Alliance Française websites in the UK and through social fora for expatriates in France, as well as resorting to a snow-balling strategy<sup>1</sup>. In practice it proved difficult to recruit couples with French men in NWE, whereas there was no such difficulty for the couples recruited in IDF.

9 Our initial idea in selecting interviewees was that partnerships should be sufficiently recent for partners to remember their adjustments at the beginning and yet to be able to say something of their evolution once the relocating partner felt more settled down. We therefore targeted couples with less than 6 years of common life. However, the relative scarcity of Anglo-French couples and the consequent difficulty of finding suitable recruits led us to relax the criterion. Moreover, we soon became aware of the crucial effects of family formation, for it seemed to matter more whether or not the couples had children.

**Table 1 - Respondents**

	North West England	Ile de France	Total
British men and French women	5 (of which 1 with children)	3 (of which 1 with children)	8
British women and French men	2 (of which 1 with children)	4 (all with children)	6
Less than 6 years together	4	4	8
More than 6 years together	3	3	6
Total	7	7	14

10 We opted for an interviewing strategy similar to the one used by Christy Shields-Argelès in her study of Franco-American couples in France and the United States (2010). We first interviewed couples together about their current eating habits; how these had been arrived at; the food story of their encounter; accounts of changes since they were together; how their habits compare with those of friends and relatives; and their plans for the future. Wherever possible follow-up interviews took place with the relocating partner on the history of their eating habits, their trajectory of migration, and how this had affected their way of eating. In two cases this second interview was not possible due to lack of time and the interviewer sought to cover the relevant themes of that second interview during the couple interview. In two more cases the reverse happened: the respondents, during the couple interview, themselves started

talking about their childhood and what had happened to them on relocating, making a follow-up interview redundant.

11 There are advantages and drawbacks to interviewing couples together or rather in separate interviews, and these must be weighed against their relevance for the problems researched (Valentine 1999). We do not develop the point, as this article does not focus on the couple and family dynamics<sup>2</sup>.

12 Conducted by a bi-lingual interviewer (Darmon), some interviews were in English, some in French, and some oscillated between both languages. Some were conducted at the interviewee's workplace, but most were in their homes. The choice of location for the recruitment of interviewees was primarily a matter of convenience in the light of difficulties in finding couples which fitted the criteria. Recruitment occurred in two large metropolitan areas whose specific spatial features have only marginal relevance for the comparison undertaken. Interviews were recorded, fully transcribed and coded using NVIVO. The study was conducted as part of an investigation into mechanisms involved in the changing of habitual behaviour, within a wider programme on sustainable practices<sup>3</sup>.

## Cooking and Eating

### Controlling diets through shifts in cooking arrangements

13 In a majority (8) of our couples, the cook was initially the French partner (3 men, 5 women) (see Table 2 below)<sup>4</sup>. The situation changed after a while and for different reasons: some couples started to share cooking, in other couples the male cook stepped back and everyday cooking was taken over by their partner, and finally in some cases the main (female) cook stopped cooking meals altogether and some kind of replacement arrangement was found. These shifts and breaks, explored in this section, tell us not only about the dynamics of cross-national couples, but also about the magnification of tensions between food injunctions – perhaps momentarily impossible to cope with – for partners distanced from their own customary environment. Such heightening of tensions bearing on food manifested itself most clearly in the confrontation over the French partner's way of cooking in France. Confrontation took a different route and gave rise to different dynamics depending upon whether the cook was the male or female partner. In both cases diets and cooking arrangements were called into question by the female partner. The gendered aspects are not analysed as such, but they help us unravel dynamics of practices from different angles.

14 In the two cases where the French cook was male, and in one other case where the French male partner had been at the steering wheel (although not directly cooking), responsibility for cooking and for deciding the menu partly switched to the female British partner after a few years. Although this switch sometimes started before parenthood, having children definitely seemed to legitimize and entrench it more fully. Some features which appeared to respondents, both British and French, to be typical of French cuisine and of behaviour in France ('rich', 'creamy' dishes; salt; sweet breakfasts), and which British partners had tolerated in their general embrace of French food in the initial years of life as a couple (despite sometimes strong distaste), were now pushed aside and explicitly designated as 'complicated', 'unhealthy' for everyday consumption, and to be reserved for treats, going out, or exceptional moments.

15 Several British respondents who were being cooked for thought that food for everyday nutrition should be 'simple' food. 'Simple' undoubtedly refers to what one is used to, but was also used by respondents to mean keeping food elements separate (juxtaposed rather than combined). Simple dishes also meant 'plain' dishes, with little elaboration and preparation, and/or with little, bland, flavour. By contrast, special and typically week-end foods, food for enjoyment and indulgence, accommodated a much wider range of tastes, amongst which spices usually featured prominently. British respondents thus found it difficult to cope with the perceived constancy of the marked tastes in their partners' cuisine. This difficulty revealed a shift to a different phase in the relationship, after the first years of sentimental and culinary embrace (very suggestively depicted in Shields-Argelès, 2010). It also referred to a conception of what eating patterns should be like – and perhaps what they used to be like back home:

polarised between bland and simple everyday fare and more elaborate ('jazzy') food at week-ends. Expression of saturation, which was usually largely overcome by the time of the interviews, indicated their assessment of 'French food' as one in which no contrast, or at least no desirable contrast, was available.

**Table 2 - Cooking arrangements and evolution**

UK-BASED COUPLES			FRANCE-BASED COUPLES		
Main initial cook	Events and changes	Cooking arrangements and diet at time of interview	Main initial cook	Events and changes	Cooking arrangements and diet at time of interview
<b>Christelle</b> and Richard	Growing interest and involvement on his part.	2-pole pattern in cooking and diet evolving toward more fluidity and shared cooking	Christian and <b>Diane</b>	When she is away he resorts to take aways and family restaurants with their 3 children	No change, one cook
Aurelie and <b>James</b>	He is and has remained the exclusive cook – except for some desserts.	No change during life together (couple breaking up at time of interview)	<b>Marion</b> and Josh	Marion on a diet at time of interview	Minimal cooking by her (diet) supplemented with ready-made dishes for him
<b>Romain</b> and Rebecca	He cooked for 3 years, then stopped. She stepped in and has learnt to cook. He is moving towards vegetarianism.	Rebecca is now the main cook. <sup>5</sup>	Didier and Karen	She is the cook, but used to cook <i>to his recipes and directions</i> . Once they had children, she changed the diet completely. He sometimes cooks when she's away	No change of main cook, total change of diet ('healthy')
Chloe and Alex	Cooking together under Alex's direction, no change	No change	<b>Cedric</b> and Rachel	Child and change of job for him	Alternated as well as shared cooking, adjustment toward 'healthier' diet
<b>Elodie</b> and Joe	Growing interest and involvement on his part.	Evolving toward 2-pole pattern in cooking and diet	<b>Marie</b> and Simon	Pregnancy, loss of interest in cooking on her part.	He is in charge (mostly heating up ready-made dishes)
Delphine and Michael	Children, work arrangements	2-pole pattern in cooking and diet (3days/4 days)	<b>Audrey</b> and Dan	Children, numerous weight-loss diets for her	No change of cook, change of diet. Supplementing with sandwiches for him.
Frederic and Gemma	Children, work arrangements	2-pole pattern in cooking and diet (3days/4 days)	<b>Pierre</b> and Amy	Child	Change of main cook and of diet during the week (moving toward 2-pole pattern)

16 For example, Rachel, a new parent, jokingly telling about the progress of her eating experience since meeting Cedric, recounted both saturation and incipient change in the quotation below:

So if it's a Friday, like last night was a Friday, and we thought, let's have a nice meal together, whereas all the other nights together, we'd have a nice meal together, but because it was Friday, you kind of say, let's get a nice bottle of wine, whereas all the other nights you've had a bottle of wine as well. So well...things like that will tend to be...we'll try to be more healthy through the week, and maybe a little bit more indulgent of a weekend.

17 Such reactions point to what British respondents perceived as the core of 'French' culinary and alimentary practices, by comparison with their own previous eating patterns: the meal

consisting of one or more elaborate dishes with a rather marked taste (e.g. mobilizing garlic, herbs, balsamic vinegar, lemon – as in what Rachel described as a ‘funky’ sauce – ‘One with fish stock, with spices, herbs, a bit of cream’), whether it is a meal taken during the week or the week-end, at lunch or dinner time, and indeed across all main eating occasions. It is perhaps these features of continuity and integration in elaborate dishes with a marked taste which most distinctively separated out accounts of meals in the re-locating British respondents’ new food environment from their former experience. Nevertheless, other aspects of the meal (cooked from fresh ingredients, composed of a sequence of items and at least one dish etc.) were often common to British respondents’ current experience and to their memories of food in their family of origin.

- 18 The representation of the French meal as consistently elaborate across all major eating occasions is a stereotype, which appears to have been mobilised by British respondents to make sense of a frustration felt at lack of contrast, notably in the ranges of tastes featuring in meals at different moments of the day or week. Indeed cooking alternating between partners as well as adopting two-pole patterns in diets seemed to be a path readily taken by several of our Anglo-French couples living in the UK if not immediately, at least after a few years.

### Ruptures: The demise of the French cook

- 19 In its everyday reality, the French meal is much less of a monolith. French respondents seemed to delight in exceptions to the norm. French interviewees whose partners did all the cooking also expressed a need for contrast, but the template they drew upon from their younger days was not one of patterned polarization but rather one of extra indulgence as exceptions to the supposedly integrated order of meals. They also sought to escape from diets which were experienced as too consistent.

- 20 For instance, Aurelie (mid 20s, living in NWE with James, who is the cook) longed for the Nutella and crisps that her boyfriend was now prohibiting, as indeed her parents had when she was growing up. She had joyful memories of her Erasmus visiting studentship in Edinburgh, before meeting James, when she would wander in ‘the sweet aisle’ (his term) and fill her basket with the latest novelties. Before meeting his wife, Christian (mid 40s, living in the Paris region with Diane, who is the main cook) used to live on up-market (Bocuse brand) ready-made dishes alternated with chocolate and crisps. A self-professed gourmet he delights in his wife’s cuisine, which she boasted was both pleasurable and healthy. However, he has his everyday portion of proscribed goodies at work or after dinner, as a treat to complement the dish portion she has left over for him from her dinner with the children. Indeed, more generally, ‘junk’ – whether as object of relish or dread – seemed much more of an issue for French respondents in our sample. Possibly this is the case because of its unique power to offer a counterpoint to the integrated set of representations, conventions, rituals and institutions usually associated with the French culinary order. As suggested by Kaufmann, regarding the use of fast foods, ‘for a short while, codes are inverted’ (2010: 88-89).

- 21 We were surprised to find that such a dynamic of order and exception could go as far as involving the ‘demise’ of the French cook. For the three French female cooks based in France, the expected integrative role of the meal was – though perhaps only temporarily – dissolved, as they suddenly felt unable to cope with the pressure of consistently elaborate cooking. Such pressure may be particularly pronounced for French partners in Anglo-French couples, as their culinary capacities (real and expected) were clearly called upon in the mutual discovery/enjoyment of each other. Although in two cases partners had started ‘cooking’ (heating up pre-cooked dishes) as a result of the French cook’s withdrawal, this was not felt as a shift in cooking arrangements, i.e. as a move towards more alternation in meal preparation, but rather as a palliative in a phase of disorder.

- 22 Marion (a French woman in her early 30s) took over cooking in France, but at the time of the interview was on a diet and just cooked vegetable in the evenings. These constituted her dinner, but only a side dish to her partner Josh, who had to fall back on ready-made meals for the more substantial part of his dinners (typically the frozen ready-made dishes from Picard<sup>6</sup>). Marie, who used to like cooking, had lost interest in the ‘past two to three years’ and, with pregnancy,

had even switched to only a bowl of cereals in the evenings. Her partner Simon, like Josh, resorted to ready-made dishes, so that at the time of the interview, they had two parallel diets. Finally Audrey, also a fine cook according to her partner, went on a series of very drastic diets after her pregnancies and was also confronted with the rejection by her elder baby daughter of the food which she was preparing for her. She has considerably changed the way she cooks, now just preparing meals for herself and her daughters (typically fish and vegetables), and has stopped providing for her partner, Dan, during the week, because taking him into account meant producing the elaborate dishes which she had previously loved to cook. He compensated with lunch (at the cafeteria or restaurant) and ate a tomato and cheese sandwich for dinner, sometimes with the left-overs from the dinner Audrey had prepared for herself.

23 Such breaks seem to epitomize an ambiguous relation to the French meal. On the one hand our respondents cherished it as family tradition and specific inheritance from their mothers or, in Audrey's case, her father. Also, somewhat stereotypically, they referred to it as 'balanced', as providing for both health and pleasure – seemingly rallying the much promoted banner of the French meal as all-purpose national treasure<sup>7</sup>. But, on the other hand, they also seemed, at some particular point, to become at a loss how to cope with the multiple injunctions associated with food: going on a diet, or pregnancy, meant that the cook stopped cooking, or stopped cooking for her partner<sup>8</sup>.

24 The all-purpose properties of the French meal seemed to stumble in particular in the face of the injunction to remain slim. The European barometer surveys (see especially EB 64.3, 2006) suggest that French eaters, by comparison with British respondents, change their eating habits more out of a concern to remain slim than because of any general idea of health. Indeed being slim is an injunction that seems to shape French women's relation to food particularly strongly, although there are important differences between different social groups (de Saint-Pol 2009: 2; 2010:148). The changes in eating habits induced by concern with losing weight and referred to by our respondents would at first sight seem more like adjustments, expressed through the use of 'less' – less butter, less fat, less or indeed no meat<sup>9</sup>. This is also suggested by respondents referring to dieting sometimes as 'being more careful' ('faire attention'), a euphemism which points to only very light restrictions made within a global concern for a healthy lifestyle, which has been said to characterise especially women from more 'affluent' backgrounds (Régnier and Masullo, 2010). Both Audrey and Marion present their diets as learning experience – indeed Audrey has visited various dieticians and is now following a 'micro-[psycho]analysis' to 'situate herself again with regard to food'.

25 Although at times playing down the changes brought by dieting to their habits, these three respondents – and their partners – also experienced dieting as a rupture, both from the point of view of cooking itself, and from that of the meaning of the shared meal. As acknowledged by Audrey, 'I don't think this will last because this is not how I like to cook, so...' Marion said, 'I don't like it too much, to eat something else than him... it looks a bit like living with a flatmate'.

26 Unlike a British counterpart, Rachel, who was able to recalibrate the French meal by making it lighter and slightly more patterned (lighter during the week/ richer at the week-end), these three French cooks seemed to find it difficult to find a way beyond the alternation between elaborate cooking for shared pleasure and the restrictions of dieting. As suggested above, this may be due to the heightening of the contradictory pressures exerted upon the French cook in an Anglo-French couple. Nevertheless these examples might also cast further light on break and rupture as acceptable solutions to cope with the pressures associated with the French meal.

## **Lunch arrangements, the scheduling of meals and consistency of diet**

27 In the same way that we found ruptures in the experience of the integral, balanced, seated French meal, we found attempts to bridge polarized patterns amongst the couples living in NWE. Polarisation not only organizes the contrast between weekday and week-end meal occasions, but also patterns the day. British respondents referred to British conventions in the middle of the day as consisting of a light lunch for convenience (typically a sandwich),



taken alone, e.g. at one's desk, which they contrasted with a longer, fuller, shared dinner, with more associated 'functions'. Conversely, in France, the institution of lunch with colleagues, taken in a workplace cafeteria or outside with pre-paid vouchers, was supposed to facilitate the observance of the integrated and consistent pattern of meals with two or three courses. A recent comparative study of the use of workplace cafeterias by Cyrille Laporte and Jean-Pierre Poulain (and their putative effects of the content of lunch in explaining higher levels of obesity in Britain – see Laporte and Poulain, 2014) has shown the persistence of this overall contrast, notwithstanding simplification of lunches in France. However an earlier review had highlighted the development of workplace lunch arrangements other than the cafeteria in France (Poulain, 2002: 61-62).

28 Certainly the variety of work arrangements for the couples interviewed in the Paris region meant that the option of a two or three course lunch with colleagues was often not available (See table 3 below). British partners often worked free-lance, small companies do not always offer this type of benefits, and work pressure for people in management positions as well as having long commuting times poses many obstacles to long lunch breaks. Due to this variety of arrangements, there were many possibilities of discrepancy between partners' lunch diets and thus between partners' bodily schedules (and their children's as the case may be), with further implications for the reshuffling of the conception of the family dinner at the table.<sup>10</sup>

29 Didier and Karen's children are following a French time schedule at school and in the after-school club which provides *goûter*<sup>11</sup> at 5.p.m. They are therefore not hungry at dinner time (which is at 7.p.m.) so dinners are light. Karen, who personally prefers to eat lightly, feels that this would not be a problem if Didier conformed to French conventions and had a 'proper' lunch. However, he squeezes lunch by getting a dish at the local *traiteur*'s in order to leave work earlier than he used to and be able to see the children before they go to bed, although this can rarely be over dinner. The following exchange came after Karen had explained that there were periods in which they would just eat soup for dinner.

Interviewer: But this implies that lunch has to be more substantial?<sup>12</sup>

Karen : Exactly!

Interviewer [to Didier]: And this is what you do I guess [*i.e. have a more substantial lunch*]?

Didier: No, not quite.

Karen: But he has to, I have told him, he has to do this!

Didier: The thing is I feel like leaving work earlier, so I eat, I don't mean quickly, but I go and get something to eat, I'm not going to be 1 hour. Generally it's a dish and a dessert.

Interviewer: Light?

Didier: Yes a very light dessert.

Interviewer: So when you come home you are hungry.

Didier: Yes, sometimes I am.

Karen: It's not easy to reconcile everybody, the children don't need [to eat more in the evening]...

30 Strikingly, contrary to the examples given so far in this paper, Didier did not readily report on his hunger – he only did so, in rather understated fashion, when queried by the interviewer more directly. Gender differences in the reporting of feelings may be at work here, but Didier's willingness to cope with his own feelings of hunger also stems from the hierarchy of priorities for organising the everyday life of the family. The overriding priority is to get children to bed early after a light meal, and the overriding constraint is that of a tight work and commuting schedule given the couple's choice of home (a large property in a town on the road to Britain and with an important community of British expatriates). These priorities had been agreed by the couple, but they in fact created contradictory pressures for Didier, with hunger as a sort of adjustment mechanism. This is not easily recognised by him, nor by his partner, who prefers to think that Didier could have a proper lunch if he decided to, as this possibility is readily available in the French context.

- 31 The cross-cutting institution of the French meal is expected to cater for widespread synchronicity – not only of eating but of appetite as well. This expectation was affirmed by respondents in spite of their special work arrangements. What is striking in the above example is that even though the everyday reality provides constant and repeated evidence that this supposed alignment regularly fails, there does not seem to be any other solution than Didier having to cope with his frequent feelings of hunger. Soren Kristensen and Lotte Holm have argued that the body has become the place of experience and of some form of inner regulation and settlement in the face of increasing ‘detachment’ of the ‘prevailing cultural model of meal patterns’ and the ‘modern social organization of time and space’ (2006: 151). This could be said to reflect much of our respondents’ experience in France, be they British or French. Arguably, this may be more likely to apply to food practices anchored in institutionalized norms, where tensions are resolved through resort to unregulated exceptions.
- 32 In Britain, many of our respondents’ workplaces had a kitchen area with a micro-wave oven, which provided the means to heat up food brought from home instead of eating a sandwich and crisps at their desks. As concern with eating ‘healthily’ and in a varied yet affordable way was widespread amongst our respondents, many took advantage of these facilities, which seemed to cater for healthism, convenience and a limited degree of sociability. The partners of the couple were able to eat the same food items during the working day by exploiting the possibility of transportable ‘home-made’ foods. This is probably specific to our sample, but it was nevertheless an integrative aspect of the patterned and polarised British practices.

**Table 3 - Comparison of lunch provisioning arrangements between partners**

UK-BASED COUPLES			FRANCE-BASED COUPLES		
	Lunch (French partner)	Lunch (British partner)		Lunch (French partner)	Lunch (British partner)
Christelle and Richard	Left-overs, heated up, eaten at desk	Sandwich + crisps, eaten at desk	Christian and Diane	Variable, depends on work: work cafeteria, or restaurant, or nothing, or snacks	Lunch at home on her own – Homemade dish
<b>Aurelie and James</b>	<b>Left-overs, heated up, eaten alone in kitchen area</b>	<b>Left-overs, heated up, at desk but preparation in kitchen area with colleagues</b>	Marion and Josh	Restaurant meal with colleagues (vouchers)	Sandwich at work
Romain and Rebecca	Sandwich + crisps, now dish at canteen (very bad, barely eats it)	Nothing or just a soup at her desk	Didier and Karen	Ready meal from Japanese or Asian quality take away, taken at desk	Salad at work (brought from home)
<b>Chloe and Alex</b>	<b>Brunch, at home, taken together</b> (2 days a week, complement at the university)	<b>Brunch, at home, taken together</b>	Cedric and Rachel	Full lunch at home or at work cafeteria (irregular work schedule)	Salad at work (brought from home)
<b>Elodie and Joe</b>	<b>Home food cooked night before, heated up, eaten at desk</b>	<b>Home food cooked night before, heated up at home before going to work</b>	Marie and Simon	Restaurant meal with colleagues (vouchers)	Sandwich at home
Delphine and Michael	Sandwich, desk	Left-overs or ‘half cooked’	Audrey and Dan	Lunch at home with	Canteen or restaurant,

		lunch (e.g. eggs) at home			daughters, veg + sometimes meat or fish	lunch has to involve meat
<b>Frederic and Gemma</b>	<b>Lunch at home 2 days with partner and children, left-overs heated up at work 3 days</b>	<b>Lunch at home with the 2 children</b>		Pierre and Amy	Variable, depends of work – often ready-made food taken with colleagues	Left-overs, home with son

In bold: same food eaten by both partners. The first name is that of the French partner, the second name of the British partner

- 33 Consistency was thus fostered in England not through a conventional observing of French meal rituals but rather through what was eaten. In two cases, such concern for a consistent diet arose from aesthetic and health concerns which led to some extent of disciplining of the (French) partner – more used to consistency in meal format. Three of our respondents, the three males raised in Britain, insisted that special care be put in meals as pleasurable moments constructed around the food eaten rather than following a conventional format. One of them meant this as a principle for sociable occasions and having friends over for dinner. However, for the other two, sharing pleasurable healthy food was an important principle of organisation of everyday life. The format and scheduling of meals were subordinated to the priority of enjoyment of the food itself. The expectation of pleasurable foods was understood by their partners, coming from a period of rather unassuming student eating on very tight budgets, but also gave rise to feelings of hunger or, conversely, saturation.

Interviewer: What do you think of your current eating habits?

Chloe: I think I would like to improve it, in terms of regularity I think, just I don't think, I mean, I feel very hungry every day and I don't think it's normal, so I should make an effort to have more meals.

Alex: We're not disciplined enough really. We're like busy doing things during the day, and sometimes you just delay.

Chloe: And sometimes, trying to eat, you know, more than twice, so...on average. You know, we have a big breakfast, as we said, and a big dinner, but in between, it's usually, it's not always regular.

Alex: Yeah. When we're out and about, especially.

Chloe: Because even if there's a box of leftovers, there isn't enough lunch so I think I need to...

Alex: Especially when you're eating quite a vegetable-based diet, and not eating meat, you... I find that ideally, you know, I would eat more frequently than three meals a day. But it's just, you know, it's kind of a compromise between time and... I suppose I'm not really very good at just like eating quickly, I tend to like, when I'm going to eat, I tend to like let's talk and enjoy.

Chloe: When it takes time, and then he cooks something, and then we sit down.

- 34 Chloe feels she can report on her hunger, as she frames it in a reflection on the differences of organisation and scheduling of meals in her family of origin and in her new life, especially concerning lunch. In the follow-up interview, she acknowledged her own disposition to regular schedules and three meals a day: *'it's true that breakfast/lunch/dinner, that doesn't exist anymore, only when I go back to France... I go back to that model very easily actually because this is how I was raised'*. However, contrary to Didier, she considers this as a matter to be addressed, on health grounds. A shared attention to the relation between food and health means that expressing hunger and exploring its causes is acceptable within this couple. Nevertheless this expression and the dialogue it gives rise to unveil profound differences in the dispositions and conceptions of such relation. For Alex, regular meal times are akin to 'discipline', which he opposes to any notion of a pleasurable meal, as regular meals are only feasible if some of them are 'eaten quickly'. However, the sequence leading up to the meal (deciding what they are going to eat, cooking, sitting down) itself seems compulsory to achieving proper enjoyment of shared food. Alex's passing allusion to discipline could be inspired by one frequent stereotype

amongst our respondents, that of the rigidity of French meal conventions, but it also calls in his own commitment to the primacy of what is eaten and ingested. Chloe's feelings on the other hand point to her failure to completely appropriate this new prioritisation and to her continuing disposition to eat three meals a day. Her hunger is 'not normal', it is a sign of exception to the norm rather than a sign of adjustment to a new discipline. The example thus points again to the dynamic of norm and exception as a resource for French respondents to make sense of their experience. Furthermore it suggests an opposition between the possibility of consistency through substance and consistency through form which seems important for comparison of alimentary and culinary practices in France and Britain.

## Conclusions

35 This paper has examined the way in which mundane activities of, for example cooking and eating and encounters associated with cross-national couple relationships in everyday life evolve together in the context of competing injunctions about appropriate conduct and embodied dispositions. The inquiry facilitates methodological reflection on the conduct of qualitative comparative analysis, theoretical conjecture about the conceptualisation of dynamics of practices, as well as more substantive conclusions regarding alimentary and culinary practices in France and Britain.

36 Methodologically, we have found interviews with cross-national couples to be a very fruitful strategy for cross-national comparison of everyday practices and their dynamics. Cross-national partners are themselves keen and reflective observers of differences between their respective countries, and thus outposts for comparison. In addition, their reported difficulties pointed to what they stumbled upon in their willingness to embrace another culture, but also of what they felt it legitimate to report on. Indeed we have argued that this mediation through the greater or lesser acceptability of felt pressures was crucial, for the lens of dispositions is not sufficient to account for reactions to the new. Health concerns, especially with regard to children, were found to be a particularly strong and legitimate mediator of the expression of discomfort and disagreement as well as an acceptable cause for shifts in everyday arrangements for cooking. Such concerns prompted partners to carry out comparative assessments of eating and culinary practices in each other's country, e.g. their allegedly more or less healthy character, and thus sometimes to make explicit their criteria and repertoires.

37 As suggested in the introduction, cross-national couples are also significant for cross-national comparison because they are keen carriers of some of the 'must-do' injunctions referred to by Jean-Pierre Poulain. As just said, relocation can heighten health-related fears. However cross-national encounters also spur the quest for enjoyment of the other's culture, in particular with regard to food and drink. These contradictory pressures, which weigh on many contemporary eaters, appear to be magnified in the case of cross-national couples, giving rise to intense feelings, situations of crisis and changes of course. They thus appear to stretch the possibilities of response afforded by alimentary and culinary practices in the countries of residence, and to capture their dynamics in a condensed fashion. This was particularly the case with the three French female cooks struggling to cope with in part self-imposed demands on their own consistent delivery of appetising meals whilst embarking on weight-loss dieting.

38 Stereotypes held by individuals can be useful for comparative research. How they are deployed unveils something of the speaker's frame of reference – here their 'dispositions' shaped through past patterns of behaviour and current injunctions. Cross-national couples display a principled reluctance to make use of such stereotypes, which endows their occasional lapses with greater significance. The productive character of the mirror effects of cultural stereotypes – in other words, the fact that they tell us more about the stero typer's frame of reference than about the object of stereotype – has been stressed for example by Fischler and colleagues in a comparison of American and European foodways (Fischler et al., 2008: 13-4). In particular, Shields-Argelès's (2008: p. 247 ff.) analysis both mobilises the stereotypical representations expressed and relocates them within a wider shared landscape of common concerns. Our own work bears much affinity to her approach, although her conceptual lens is that of identity

and identity formation around food, whereas we are more concerned with practices and their dynamics.

- 39 Theoretically we have been concerned with culinary and alimentary practices and the possibilities they afford eaters in different settings in the face of various current injunctions and pressures. Practices provide us with a ‘meso’ level of observation and analysis for cross-national comparison, as questions can be asked about differences between patterns of practices mobilised in response to similar tensions – typically between injunctions to enjoy, eat healthily and be responsible parents. The analysis pointed to the patterning of culinary and alimentary practices according to two opposed structuring principles: a principle of consistency and a principle of contrast. The relation between consistency and contrast points us to a dynamic view of practices themselves, one going beyond the logics of combination of the elements of a practice or the trajectories of adhesion and defection of their careers (Shove et al., 2012).
- 40 We surmise that the dynamics of culinary and alimentary practices in France could be framed as a dynamic of norm and exception, whilst in Britain contrast is provided through the alternation, possibly polarisation, of practices throughout the day and week. Each of these dynamics affords eaters possible strategies for coping with contradictory injunctions and making sense of new situations. In a dynamic of norm and exception, consistency of course is provided by the norm – but what about in a dynamic of alternation? Consistency could there be said to arise from the repetition of variation. In addition, our empirical material suggested another possible level of understanding of consistency – as achieved through particular aesthetic or ethical food projects, and thus as a quest specific to specific groups (‘foodies’, vegetarians etc.). Substantively, dynamics of consistency and contrast seem, unsurprisingly, to revolve in France primarily around form – especially the format of the meal, the convention of three meals a day, etc. – while in Britain substance, what is ingested, seems primary.

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## Notes

- 1 Special thanks are due to Dr. Bénédicte Brahic, Manchester Metropolitan University, for facilitating several of these contacts.
- 2 Our interviewing strategy is explained at more length in a paper to be published on cross-national couples, food and the life-course.
- 3 The research reported on here was one of the seven research projects carried out by the Sustainable Practices Research Group (SPRG), which gathered together eight UK universities. The SPRG was funded by the Economic & Social Research Council, the Scottish Government and the Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs.
- 4 Amongst the other couples, the cook is the British partner in three cases and cooking was shared from the start in the remaining three.
- 5 This very interesting and rich experience could not be reported on in the context of the present paper. It is one of the chief cases addressed in a paper to be published on food and the life-course.
- 6 Picard is a French food company specialised in the production and distribution of frozen products (including ready-made dishes) under its own brand.
- 7 Now inscribed as 'the gastronomic meal of the French' on the Unesco heritage list. For an informative and distanced account of that process, see Naulin 2012.
- 8 The ruptures mentioned may be interpreted against the trends in the gendered division of labour in recent time-use surveys. E.g. see Champagne et al. 2014; and Lader et al. 2006. In their qualitative comparative study of cooking in France and the UK, Andy Gatley, Martin Caraher and Tim Lang found that British men were more likely to engage with cooking on a regular (though not every day) basis (e.g. 'the cooking of a summer barbecue, a dinner party, a Sunday roast or a Friday night curry') whilst their French counterparts tended to only cook for special and large social occasions (Gatley et al. 2014: 79).
- 9 The National Programme for Nutrition and Health launched in 2001 has given rise to daily slogans: 'for your health, eat less fat, less sugar, less salt' (quoted in Régnier and Masullo 2010: 186).
- 10 A number of recent studies have pointed to the displacement of the family meal to week-ends and the reconfiguration of the family weekday dinner as the shared dinner between children and one parent only (e.g. Larmet 2002; Brannen et al. 2013).
- 11 'Goûter' is a snack taken by children and teen-agers after school.

12 The interview was held in French, this is a translation.

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### **Abstracts**

In this paper we explore the merits of interviews with bi-national couples about their eating habits for casting light on cross-national comparison between foodways. In the context of an exploratory study looking at eating habits and change in France and Britain (England), we found that the experiences of cross-cultural couples and cross-national relocation were fruitful vehicles for the comparison of practices. Generally speaking, partners seeking to form a 'commensal unit' (Sobal et al., 2002) respond to varying and at times contradictory demands by setting up routines, drawing e.g. in alternated ways on cultural templates from the two countries. However, tensions are not always settled in such ordered ways. The present article studies breaks, shifts and ruptures with particular regard to cooking and lunch arrangements, as they reveal of wider pressures exerted on food practices in the two countries. Our analysis suggests that disorder and ruptures are part of the experience of the French culinary and alimentary 'order', whereas more polarised patterns of eating in the UK and related efforts to calculate and balance out the various functions assigned to food spur searches for consistency.

### **Sous pression – quelles leçons peut-on tirer des pratiques culinaires et alimentaires des couples Franco-anglais pour la comparaison transnationale ?**

Cet article explore les habitudes alimentaires de couples binationaux et les mérites d'un tel terrain pour la comparaison transnationale des modes d'alimentation. Dans le contexte d'une étude exploratoire des habitudes et changements alimentaires en France et en Grande-Bretagne (Angleterre), l'expérience des couples biculturels, ainsi que l'expérience d'installation à l'étranger pour l'un des deux partenaires, nous ont semblé constituer des moyens fructueux de comparaison des pratiques. Les couples cherchant à former une 'unité de commensalité' (Sobal et al., 2002) répondent à des demandes variées et parfois contradictoires en établissant des routines, alternant par exemple la mobilisation de références culturelles des deux pays. Cependant les tensions ne se résolvent pas toujours de manière si réglée. Le présent article étudie les changements, déplacements et ruptures intervenant en particulier dans les responsabilités culinaires et l'organisation du repas de midi, instances révélatrices des pressions plus larges qui s'exercent sur les pratiques alimentaires dans les deux pays. Notre

analyse suggère que le désordre et les ruptures font partie intégrante de la façon dont l' 'ordre' des pratiques culinaires et alimentaires françaises est vécu – tandis que les modes alimentaires plus polarisés en Grande-Bretagne, et les efforts qui leur sont liés pour calculer et équilibrer les différentes fonctions assignées à l'alimentation, donnent lieu à des recherches de cohérence.

***Index terms***

***Mots-clés*** : comparaison transnationale, France, Royaume-Uni, pratiques alimentaires, couple, unité de commensalité, cuisiner, déjeuner

***Keywords*** : cross-national comparison, France, UK, food practices, couple, commensal unit, cooking, lunch