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Marie Plessz, Marie-Clémence Le Pape

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The political dimension of consumption work, or political consumption as work: How French households do gatekeeping on the food market

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Marie Plessz^{a*} and Marie-Clémence Le Pape^b

^a Centre Maurice Halbwachs, Inra, EHESS, ENS, CNRS, PSL Research University, Paris, France

^b Centre Max Weber, UMR 5283, Université Lyon-II/CNRS, 14 avenue Berthelot, 69363 Lyon CEDEX 07, France. marie-clemence.lepape@univ-lyon2.fr

*Corresponding author. CMH, 48 bd Jourdan, 75014 Paris, France, marie.plessz@inra.fr ORCID ID: 0000-0001-7026-6224

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Abstract

Food policies increasingly expect consumers to regulate markets through their purchases. We draw a parallel with the sociology of art markets, where gatekeepers are intermediaries who select products in a context of excess supply and complex evaluation criteria. We see gatekeeping as part of consumption work, extending Glucksmann's 'total social division of labor' to the labour of regulating markets. At the same time, gatekeeping is part of food work, so it requires interacting with both market products and household members. Using a multi-site qualitative study of working-class families in France, we found that all our respondents engaged in gatekeeping when shopping in supermarkets. This had consequences for both the organization of consumption work and interactions with household members. Some households also sourced food outside of the supermarket (from the garden or local producers); this implied interacting and sharing work with the extended family network, but involved no gatekeeping. The interactional work involved in gatekeeping (before, during and after purchases) or in other forms of provisioning contributed to reinforcing mothers' gendered identities both within their families (as providers of care and facilitators of family relations) and in the labour market, and related to households' positions in the property market.

Keywords: family; food provisioning; France; gatekeeper; political consumption; rural; shopping; supermarket

Introduction

Over the last decades, consumer choices have increasingly been seen as a way to regulate markets (Bevir and Trentmann 2007; Guthman 2011; Micheletti 2003). This is especially true of food consumption because of its sizeable economic, environmental, social and sanitary consequences.

Policy makers and analysts tend to over-estimate consumers' commitment and agency (Evans 2011; Holm 2003; Koch and Sprague 2014). As part of food work, purchasing food involves relating to the other members of the household as much as to the market (DeVault 1991; Miller 1998). Considering consumption as work also means that its nature and extent are shaped by the wider division of labour along the food chain (Glucksmann 2005; Wheeler and Glucksmann 2013).

Research on the organisation of consumption work and on its political dimension seldom intersects. In this article, we bridge the gap between these two streams. The labour of regulating the food supply is organised across many agents. As consumers, households are expected to play their part through their purchases. Drawing on the literature on consumption work, political consumption and art markets, we identify this work as *gatekeeping*. So do all households contribute to regulating food markets by doing gatekeeping in all circumstances? How do they organise this work? How does it fit into family relations?

We used a qualitative, multi-site study to examine the organisation of food provisioning in urban and rural French households, both in supermarkets and through other forms of provisioning. Our respondents were not middle class, did not see themselves as citizen-consumers, yet we found that they engaged in gatekeeping when shopping in supermarkets – even if they were often dissatisfied with their achievements. We contrast this experience with other forms of food provisioning (growing or receiving vegetables, buying from local producers).

We show that gatekeeping is a responsibility accepted by mothers and a work that spans the period before, during and after food purchases, but is specific to food provisioning in supermarkets. We examine how mothers and fathers share gatekeeping in the household and the extended family network. We explore how the positions of household members in the labour and property market, as well as the support from their kinship networks, configure consumption work and gatekeeping.

Consumption work, political consumption and gatekeeping

Consumption work

Several scholars have used the concept of work to account for consumption or consumer activities (DeVault 1991; Dujarier 2016; Glucksmann 2005). We analyse consumption work in the light of Glucksmann's 'total social organisation of labour' framework, the aim of which is to 'integrate the unpaid work of the consumer into the division of labour' (Glucksmann 2014, 4). Glucksmann (2016,

881) defines consumption work as ‘all work undertaken by consumers necessary for the purchase, use, re-use and disposal of consumption goods’ (see also Wheeler and Glucksmann 2013). Consumption work varies in extent and nature according to ‘the wider division of labour beyond the household ... a process that also comprises producers, manufacturers and retailers’ (Glucksmann 2014, 3).

Situating a household’s unpaid work in the framework of food production, distribution and consumption does not set aside the question of task division within the household; Glucksmann (2014) instead hopes to reconcile both perspectives. At the same time, she highlights ‘the interdependence of differing socio-economic domains’ (Glucksmann 2014, 3): typically, food consumption work is configured by both the food and labour markets, with the latter providing income but imposing time constraints (Devine et al. 2006; Evans 2014; Jabs et al. 2007).

This theoretical perspective on consumption work highlights how the task division within the household and the wider organisation of food production, distribution and disposal shape the work that people do in order to consume. It examines the consequences of this ‘total social organisation of labour’, from economic or environmental outcomes to people’s wellbeing. Yet, in line with her economic sociological perspective, Glucksmann does not address the political dimension of consumption. In order to address it, we consider that the work of regulating the food market is also subject to a ‘total social organisation’, which involves many actors, including states, NGOs, firms and households as consumers. We do not attempt to map this total organisation here; rather, we examine consumers’ contribution to this regulatory work, looking at how they organise it inside the household and how it is partly configured from outside the household – for example, in ‘differing socioeconomic domains’ such as the labour and property markets.

In our case, consumption work is also food work, which is interactional in the sense that purchasing food *for* the household is part of negotiating relations of care, coordination, control and power *in* the household (Beagan et al. 2015; DeVault 1991; Miller 1998). This suggests that task division is not static, even though during the fieldwork we observed a certain state of affairs in each household. The interactions over food provisioning both contribute to shaping, and are shaped by, gendered relations and identities in the household (Beagan et al. 2008; DeVault 1991).

Political consumption

The consequences of consumption work in terms of market regulation are usually captured by the literature on political consumption. Political consumption can be defined as ‘consumers’ use of the market as an arena for politics in order to change institutional or market practices found to be ethically, environmentally, or politically objectionable’ (Stolle and Micheletti 2015, 39). It is sometimes called political consumerism, ethical consumption, citizen-consumption, or alternative consumption.

The sociology of political consumption has studied how some consumers engage in consumption with the specific purpose of influencing market actors' decisions (Dubuisson-Quellier 2013). These consumers are sometimes termed citizen-consumers because they explicitly seek to bring non-economic concerns to commercial exchange. It is still unclear whether these political consumers will remain a minority of middle-class activists, and whether a minority may trigger change on the market (Dubuisson-Quellier 2013; Elliott, Powell and Brenton 2015; Yates 2015).

Another result of this literature that is relevant for our study is that policy-makers, NGOs and industries anticipate consumer behaviour on the retail food market. These anticipations materialise in policy instruments such as labels, nutrition facts or educational campaigns directed at consumers, in order to improve the market supply (Bergeron, Castel and Dubuisson-Quellier 2014; Spaargaren, Oosterveer and Loeber 2012). In other cases, they result in 'blaming consumers' (Holm 2003, Evans 2011) for the markets' malfunctions. These studies seldom examine whether consumers do behave as expected.

Researchers interested in gender and consumption examined how mothers addressed these expectations. They highlighted the far-reaching influence of the notion that a properly informed consumer is responsible for her choices and their consequences (Cairns, Johnston and MacKendrick 2013; Cook 2009; Johnston, Szabo and Rodney 2011) They underscore 'the intersecting ideals of motherhood and alternative consumption, which work together to define good mothers as those who preserve their children's purity and protect the environment *through conscientious food purchases*' (Cairns, Johnston and MacKendrick, 2013, 101, emphasis added).

In this article, we examine the 'political' part of consumption work that Cairns terms 'conscientious food purchases' and that policy-makers expect from consumers. We call it gatekeeping, drawing a parallel with gatekeepers in the markets of cultural creation and with earlier discussions in the field of nutrition.

Gatekeeping

Sociologists studying markets of cultural products have provided useful insights on gatekeeping when investigating 'who selects cultural products for distribution and according to what criteria' (Kawashima 1999, 264). Many agents are involved in this selection process, including art dealers, brokers, critics and galleries. They contribute to regulating the market by boosting the demand for some products. Studying art brokers who select bands for night clubs, Foster, Borgatti and Jones (2011, 248) stress that gatekeepers 'solve complex search and selection problems in markets characterized by excess supply, demand uncertainty, and socially defined evaluation criteria'. Ethnographic accounts of shopping clearly indicate that consumers face 'excess supply' and 'solve complex search and selection problems' when shopping in supermarkets. They also juggle with their

families' tastes and various health concerns (DeVault 1991; Evans 2014; Miller 1998) – something close to 'demand uncertainty and socially defined evaluation criteria'.

Mead and Lewin had compared housewives to gatekeepers, because they decided what food to purchase for the whole household (Lewin 1943; Wansink 2002). They advised policy-makers to reach gatekeepers in order to influence food consumption. However, they saw gatekeeping as a role (in the functionalist perspective) that logically suited women as homemakers. This prevented them from addressing issues of task division, gender or power (McIntosh and Zey 1998).

By conceiving of gatekeeping as part of consumption work, we avoid these pitfalls and open up new research questions. If we see it as work, gatekeeping is subject to divisions of labour: we may examine how it is organised in the household. Work requires efforts and skills, yet it may fail to achieve its goal, encouraging us to question 'what people do when they are *trying to*' do it (McCoy 2009, 128). We can examine the interactions upon which it relies and that it gives rise to. Finally, in line with Glucksmann, we may examine how it is configured by its interdependencies with other market actors and with 'differing socioeconomic domains' – in this article, the labour and property markets, which are critical for the daily life of households.

Materials and methods: A study in three locations in France

The literature highlights policy makers' expectations regarding consumer agency and responsibility both in North America and Europe (Holm 2003, Koch and Sprague 2014, Bergeron, Castel and Dubuisson-Quellier 2014, Cairns, Johnston and MacKendrick 2013). How consumers react to these expectations has received much less attention, especially in Europe. Socioeconomic position matters (Cairns, Johnston and MacKendrick 2013, Sinikka, Powell and Brenton 2015), yet working class and rural consumers are understudied. Our fieldwork was designed to address these gaps.

This article relies on a qualitative study carried out in France in 2012. France is a good setting for our research because the French eat more than 80 per cent of their meals at home – far more than Americans and most Europeans (Escalon, Bossard and Beck 2009, 199; Warde et al. 2007) – and they spend 72 per cent of their food budget (for home consumption) in supermarkets (Kranklader 2014).

We selected households of similar structure and socioeconomic status in three contrasted locations. We contacted people who belonged to the 'little-middles', a term coined recently by French ethnographers (Cartier et al. 2016). We purposively avoided the middle class, as they are regularly surveyed in the literature on citizen-consumers; and economically deprived households, as their food purchases are mostly driven by their budget constraints. The families we interviewed comprised at least one child under 10 years old and at least one parent in a stable job, in a routine occupation with some vocational qualification. We contacted them through trusted go-betweens, attempting to

interview both partners, either separately or together, and a parent of each partner when they agreed to participate.

We recruited families from three locations, contrasted in terms of urbanisation and economic opportunities: four from the Paris metropolitan area; four from Les Collines; and seven from Bonneville. In the Paris area, property prices decrease as one moves further from the city: one family lived in a house on the outskirts of the metropolitan area; the others lived in suburban flats closer to Paris. All the families purchased their food from supermarkets. Les Collines is a rural area in the south of France, where respondents lived in villages of a couple of hundred inhabitants. Recent studies show that many US rural areas have become food deserts (Bitto et al. 2003; Rodriguez and Maraj Grahame 2016). This was not the case in Les Collines: respondents had access to several supermarkets, street markets, local producers and sometimes vegetable gardens. Housing was inexpensive, so all but one respondent lived in detached houses with gardens where they could grow vegetables. The city of Bonneville (20,000 inhabitants) is located in the east of France, in a wine region, where property prices are higher than in Les Collines but lower than Paris; the respondents all lived in flats without gardens.

We collected 43 semi-structured interviews from fifteen Caucasian/white¹, lower-class families. The interviews started with a family tree, then covered food-provisioning practices, paid work schedules, daily organisation of food-related activities and relations with the family network. They were then transcribed verbatim and anonymised by using pseudonyms for respondents and locations. They held stable jobs except for two mothers on parental leave, one father on disability leave and one doing odd jobs. The mothers worked either full time (as a sales assistant, salaried florist, postwoman, hairdresser) or part time (health insurance clerk, child minder). The fathers all worked full time (mason, bus driver, foreman), with three of them working night shifts or non-standard schedules (baker and maintenance technicians). Two households in Bonneville owned small shops (a bakery and a tobacconist), but they were not the most affluent participants and both partners worked extended hours.

Gatekeeping and forms of provisioning

In this section, we show how our respondents consider it their responsibility to control the food that enters their homes and we provide examples of the actions they take to this end.

Gatekeeping as part of consumption work

Our respondents saw it as a moral responsibility to control the food they did and *did not* purchase for home consumption. Florence made this clear when she criticised her own home, blaming her inability to comply with her own expectations:

This house is a junk food palace in a way.

Interviewer: Is it? How so?

Florence: Cakes and sweets. This house is practically the cake department of a store.

Interviewer: And what about that makes you feel bad?

Florence: The quantity, and the ... I don't know, I think it is too much ... Yeah, my daughters say 'I want this', I ... I buy it.

(Florence, educational assistant; partner, technician in dairy factory; two children; Les Collines)

Florence did not accuse the supermarket of being a 'junk food palace'; however, she expected her home to be different, specifying that her daughters did not have free access to the cakes. Carine and Romain gave another vivid picture of the need to control the food that entered their home. Carine ran a tobacconist shop in Bonneville, so she was both a consumer and a vendor of food:

Carine: [Our son] would gorge on sweets. In the shop there are lots of sweets, and true, he craves them, he looks at them, but in the end he does not eat much of them because we don't have them at home.

Romain: And we don't allow him to take them because, you take a box of sweets, these plastic boxes ... you can see the fat ...

Carine: ... it's awful.

(Carine, tobacconist; partner Romain, assists in the shop and does odd jobs; two children; Bonneville)

Carine took it for granted that commercial food supplies were full of tempting but unhealthy commodities. Carine and Romain would not allow such food into their home, however. Even though the home and shop were in the same building, they considered them 'separate spheres' (Zelizer 2009).

Participants' concerns with food purchases echoed the main French nutritional education program, which advises families to plan meals and develop shopping lists to 'avoid being tempted by foods you do not actually need' (Programme National Nutrition Santé 2014). The increasing numbers of mandatory and voluntary labels on food packaging also suggest that consumers are expected to take responsibility for the products they purchase.

Our respondents therefore considered gatekeeping to be part of their consumption work. They accepted it as their responsibility in the organisation of food provisioning. We did not find that they linked it with broader ethical or environmental commitments. Instead, they were concerned with the nutritional and health benefits (and dangers) of the food for their partners, their children and themselves (Dubuisson-Quellier 2013). Yet they took up the job that policy and market actors assigned them in the broad division of the work of regulating retail food markets.

Gatekeeping before, during and after shopping

Our respondents did not restrict gatekeeping to making choices in the aisles of supermarkets. Gatekeeping started before, and extended beyond, actual shopping. Gloria sometimes planned meals, a complex and time-consuming process:

Gloria: When I am really, really planning ahead, I sit and I make a menu – one week, two weeks in advance. Then I shop according to my menus, but I don't always have the will and the time to do this, because if I am planning the menus like this, I open all the cookbooks, I go through them, and I list the recipes, with the book open, then I list what I have to buy ... So if I do this, on a Sunday afternoon, it takes two hours.

(Gloria, child minder in her own home; partner bus driver; three children; Paris)

She noted that such time-consuming organisation allowed her to save money and avoid waste. However, most weekends she did not manage to spend the entire two hours planning the meals and writing the shopping list.

Product packages and labels provide abundant information, including nutritional values and ingredients, but using them requires time and knowledge. Many respondents checked only a few facts, including the price; the specific facts that were deemed important seemed to derive from meaningful biographical events (Plessz et al. 2016). Flo checked that sugar was not among the first four ingredients in canned food – something she had learnt when she developed gestational diabetes during her first pregnancy. More often still, respondents routinely purchased well-known products and did not read the labels at all, as other studies on food purchases discovered (Dubuisson-Quellier 2006).

After shopping, some respondents tried to cast food in a certain light to direct family members towards foods identified as appropriate and away from the unhealthy products.

Christine: On the weekends, we put much more food on the table – fruit juices, if I have prepared fruits in syrup I bring them – it can be very varied. Bread, butter, croissants ... But usually the kids stick to their cereal; the basis for the kids is cereal. But I'll put bananas on the table, or apples.

Interviewer: Do you sometimes eat salty foods in the morning?

Christine: Seldom, because it is not very healthy. the kids may ask for *saucisson* [dried sausage]; they may go to the fridge and pick the *saucisson*, on the weekend ... We don't say no, but we don't give them either.

(Christine, medical secretary; partner, foreman; two children; Bonneville)

Nudge is now considered a marketing and public policy instrument (Thaler and Sunstein 2008); Christine used it in her own home, creating a foodscape for her family according to her hierarchy of

food, bringing fruit to the fore and leaving the ‘not very healthy’ sausage in the fridge. Gatekeeping thus appears to be less a stage in consumption work – a step that consumers would perform in supermarkets when ‘facing the market’ – than an ongoing part of food work and the interactions on which it relies.

Only in supermarkets

While every household in the study regularly purchased food from a supermarket, some – mainly in Bonneville and Les Collines – also obtained food through other channels: from their own or relatives’ gardens, or from local producers. This local food represented only a small proportion of their food consumption, but it meant a lot to our respondents. Gatekeeping took up a paradoxical form: households selected a source of food that that did not require further vigilance. Florence, who blamed herself for how she shopped in supermarkets, valued all other food sources as intrinsically good:

Florence: I have preserves – duck confit, but home-made – green beans, ratatouille, the same ... We buy veal from Mr Marsac, in [Village], we deep-freeze, and the rest of the meat, we purchase at wholesale butcher S*** in [town], with my parents.

Interviewer: You must save a lot of money.

Florence: Yes.

Interviewer: How much?

Florence: ... No idea! And frankly, I would rather eat Mr Marsac’s veal from across the street even if I had to eat veal less often ... And my in-laws, they make it all from scratch: *saucisson* [dried sausage], *pâté*, *boudin* [blood sausage]

Interviewer: This is something that you like?

Florence: Yes, it is a good thing.

Interviewer: How so?

Florence: Well, at least I know where the vegetables come from ... and yeah, ...I think, it’s good.

(Florence, educational assistant; partner, technician in dairy factory; two children, Les Collines)

Florence’s positive experience of food provisioning from family gifts, local producers or small shopkeepers was linked to the form of provisioning rather than to the products supplied. She praised both her parents’ sausages and vegetables; she checked the sugar content of canned green peas in the supermarket, but considered home-made duck confit (cooked and preserved in grease) as ‘good’; she

criticised her purchasing of pastries but was proud to bake cakes for her daughters' breakfasts. Boris and Angélique also compared purchasing from the supermarket with local producers:

Interviewer: [In the supermarket] do you read the labels, the prices – what do you check?

Angélique: Yes, the prices. I mean ... Of course we pay attention to the prices, but we do not always buy the cheapest. No way, we would rather eat less, but eat better. ... But for meat, vegetables, we go to the local producer, we don't check whether it is cheaper somewhere else.

(Angélique, postwoman; partner, mason; one child; Les Collines)

By saying that prices do not matter when purchasing from local producers, respondents clearly placed this form of provisioning alongside receiving food from relatives or growing food (Angélique and her husband have a large vegetable garden), as opposed to purchasing from supermarkets.

Our respondents thus took for granted that their consumption work involved gatekeeping. Gatekeeping was connected to purchasing food in supermarkets, regardless of the food purchased or whether people saw themselves as 'citizen-consumers'. It appeared as relational work because its goal was to protect household members from potentially harmful products. A range of forms of provisioning, including hunting, gardening, purchasing from local producers and visiting the street market were set in opposition to shopping in supermarkets: in a way, they circumvented the gatekeeping work. Although consumption work in these forms of provisioning did not require gatekeeping, it sometimes required a considerable amount of work.

Divisions of consumption work and gatekeeping

Here we examine how family members share gatekeeping, articulating two levels of analysis: the division of the labour, and the interactions between family members. Supermarket shopping could be specialised, delegated or shared, but in each case we collected contrasting forms of interactions between partners. Other forms of food provisioning, while requiring no gatekeeping, relied on the collaboration of both partners and often that of the extended family.

Specialisation

When the women in our study were not employed full time, they were usually responsible for the shopping and gatekeeping, which was consistent with existing consumption work or gatekeeping studies (Beagan et al. 2008; DeVault 1991; McIntosh and Zey 1998). Gloria worked at home as a child minder (four days a week) and a Tupperware salesperson, presenting herself to clients as a well-organised and effective household manager. She was satisfied with her control over food purchases:

Interviewer: Do you do the shopping?

Gloria: Usually, yes. Actually, yes, let's say that I decide what must be purchased.

(Gloria, child minder in her own home; partner, bus driver; three children; Paris)

Anne also did all the shopping but she was not satisfied with her gatekeeping:

Anne: I buy [breakfast cereal brand]. I am not a fan ... at least I get the [breakfast cereal brand] wholegrain, you know, no GMOs.

Interviewer: Okay.

Anne: That's a requirement I have ... But I would buy those cereals, and the next day they would change their minds for no apparent reason ...

Interviewer: So how do you manage meals, with their tastes and what you would like to give them?

Anne: It's horrible. You don't know what to do, what they have eaten, not eaten. It's always the same foods coming back. If you listen to them, it's only rice, potatoes, fries, rice, that's it.

Anne also had to account for her husband's preferences:

Anne: Sometimes he tells me ... The other day he asked me to buy some chocolate bars: 'I want some.' I asked him, 'Why? You don't want them, you don't like them, you say they don't taste good.' And he said 'Yes, but right now ...'

Interviewer: So you purchase foods that you know he likes; you buy them anyway so he can eat?

Anne: Yes, I buy ... I buy branded foods, no additives, you see, not the cheapest foods.
(Anne, runs a bakery; partner, baker; three children; Bonneville)

Provisioning food went along with intense interactional and emotional work for Anne, despite the fact that she made most of the purchases herself. This interactional work did not go smoothly.

Delegation

When the women we interviewed were employed full time, they often delegated part of the shopping but not necessarily the gatekeeping: Carine set the rules defining proper food, which her partner Romain applied:

Carine: I told Romain – we had a long conversation – I said, 'The kids don't ask for cereals', and actually, I saw this TV program on the dietary allowances for sugar – they refer to adult guidelines, not to children guidelines.

When we interviewed Romain, he referred to the same discussion:

Romain: We used to buy cereals, but they are not so good, they've got a lot of fat ... You waste more, they don't finish their share ... They taste good, they are convenient, but from the ... how do you call it? From the nutritional point of view, it's not ... Bread is better ...

Carine: Too much sugar.

Romain: That's it, compared to dietary allowances.

(Carine, tobacconist; Romain, her partner, assists in the shop and does odd jobs; two children; Bonneville)

Although at the time of the interview Carine and Romain presented this as a well-functioning household practice, it was not implemented without effort, as the 'long conversation' suggests.

In one household, the wife executed the purchasing while the husband controlled the gatekeeping:

Arnaud: I tend to check the [nutritional] compositions when she comes back from shopping. I control at home. I say, 'No, this must no longer be purchased ...' Also we don't eat a lot of meat. I mean, some people eat too much meat, I think.

Caroline: We don't eat red meat.

Arnaud: I eat meat regularly at the staff canteen. That's true that here [at home] they don't, except ground beef. But I don't know if it's good, it is quite fattening. I am lucky to have steak once a week at the canteen, steak and French fries, I take steak with salad ... Well, now, this is my own point of view, as a sportsman maybe.

(Caroline, on parental leave; Arnaud, maintenance technician; two children; Les Collines)

As an amateur cyclist, Arnaud had received information on his nutritional needs. He controlled the budget, the food groups and the nutritional information, and his wife accepted his directions. Here again, gatekeeping points to the interactions over food in the family, to how household members jointly shape not only their food consumption but also their interactions over food. In these households, the partners seemed engaged in a form of mentoring, with one partner delegating tasks while the other acknowledged the higher competence of their spouse. Arnaud's case illustrates that such competence is not intrinsically feminine, it comes from socialization. Such competence and mentoring, however, are only possible if both partners accept it.

Sharing tasks

Sharing tasks requires considerable coordination (DeVault 1991). Here we contrast two couples who apparently shared supermarket purchases equally, but derived completely different relations from

doing so. Eva and Bruno emphasized spontaneity, task-sharing, control over food and general satisfaction with each other's contributions:

Eva: When there is nothing left in the fridge, the one who sees there is nothing left goes shopping! It depends. Otherwise, I go during Tom's music lesson on Wednesdays I finish the shopping within an hour. Or on Wednesdays at noon, when I go get Fanny from school, I stop at [frozen food store] and buy my frozen dishes.

We then interviewed Bruno.

Bruno: I often do the shopping. Every week, I don't mind.

Interviewer: How do you organise your shopping?

Bruno: Yeah, you know, I know what foods we always use I know that Eva goes on Wednesday usually, she buys what she has seen was missing. But yes, Eva will do a big shop, like, she goes to [frozen food store] and buys a lot of frozen food – stuff that you just have to heat. We put it in the freezer, and we know that if we don't have time to cook, we can take a dish out quickly.

(Eva, clerk; Bruno, maintenance foreman; three children; Paris area)

Lucie also took turns with her husband to do the shopping, but she criticised his purchases:

Lucie: We do not buy the same things ... we do not shop the same way. He buys soda because 'it pleases the children' ... it's ... we do not have the same concept of food shopping. Last night I got mad at him because he bought six big bottles of soda. I said, 'I forbid sodas at home'.

'Don't worry, there is no sugar in it!'

'It's [Brand], I know it, it's sweetened.'

'But what is he gonna drink?'

'Water!! He can drink water!' It drives me crazy! If it were up to me I would empty the bottles in the sink, because my son is spoiling his appetite with those sodas.

(Lucie, hairdresser; partner, IT instructor; three children; Paris area)

Our hypothesis is that the weekly trip to purchase frozen ready meals allowed Eva to retain control of a significant source of food, while at the same time sharing the work and responsibility for the small shopping trips. In contrast, when Lucie's partner did the shopping, he purchased a whole week's food, revealing the discrepancies between their definitions of proper food and proper gatekeeping (Beagan et al. 2008). By narrating conflicts, Lucie depicted the fact that in her couple partners did not relinquish control to each other: they both held their own views on proper food and proper consumption work.

No matter how partners shared shopping, gatekeeping required interactional work with the rest of the family. There was no clear relationship between the division of the gatekeeping work and the household diet – probably because definitions of proper food (and proper gatekeeping) varied across households. Yet gatekeeping had a bearing on the relations between household members and revealed the extent and forms of interactional work into which partners were drawn.

Divisions of work in other forms of food provisioning

The other forms of food provisioning almost always involved fathers. More importantly, they also involved the extended family. This contrasted vividly with supermarket purchases.

Organising work beyond the household

Several respondents were given sizeable amounts of food by their extended families. Florence regularly received food from both her in-laws and her own parents; Christine explained how her parents' garden saved her family from gardening while providing a variety of vegetables:

Interviewer: Would you like to have a vegetable garden?

Christine: Yes, except that I don't think we have enough time, because we both work full time, like everyone else, but my husband is very much into sports, and I can't imagine myself taking care of a vegetable garden alone, or maybe a very small patch, just some leeks, some tomatoes ... while my dad has acres of garden. Actually, all our vegetables, our fruit, come from my parents..

(Christine, medical secretary; partner, foreman; two children; Bonneville)

Boris and Angélique both worked full time (mason and postwoman with one child in Les Collines) but maintained a large garden, which allowed them to preserve and freeze vegetables for the winter. They both worked in the garden: 'I prepare things, the seeds, the planting, he prepares the soil, and we both maintain the garden, because it is a lot of work,' Angélique said. Moreover, Angélique's sister and mother lived less than 2 kilometres away and also had gardens. During the summer– harvest season – the three households took holidays in turn. Those who stayed visited the others' gardens, watered the plants, picked and preserved the vegetables, sometimes after cooking them according to shared recipes. Provisioning food from sources other than supermarkets can be seen as a way to circumvent gatekeeping work, or to do it 'upstream' by selecting a source that is (viewed as) providing only proper food. It also requires relational work, however, which in this case had developed beyond the household, involving relatives living nearby.

Interactional work

Interactional work when provisioning food from gardens or local producers contrasted with gatekeeping in the supermarket in two significant respects.

First, respondents used ‘we’ rather than ‘I’ when referring to purchasing food from local producers. For example, under ‘Only in supermarkets’, Florence criticised ‘her’ shopping in the supermarket but valued ‘their’ bulk purchasing of veal involving her parents. Similarly, Angélique, who accessed home-grown food and local produce with her husband and relatives, mentioned that ‘she’ usually shopped at the supermarket on her way home from work. Interactional work performed when provisioning outside of supermarkets thus seemed to reinforce a sense of solidarity in the extended family rather than pinpointing a specific member as working for the group. But this may be due to the fact that households in which the kinship network was not suitable to sustain such demanding modes of provision did not engage in it at all.

Even when households did not have a vegetable garden, extended families might be involved in food provisioning. Séverine, a single mother living in Bonneville with her son, relied heavily on her parents:

My mother, when she goes shopping, she says ‘Oh look, I have this, that, take it ... do you want an avocado?’ The avocado is ripe, I say ‘sure, yes.’

These food gifts, the origin of which seemed to vary (supermarket, street market, local producers), fitted into intense sociability between Séverine and her parents (also living in Bonneville where they had been born), and several other forms of help from them to her. They gave breakfast and lunch to Séverine’s four-year-old son every weekday, and Séverine trusted them to feed her son according to standards that she had known as a child and of which she approved. By doing so, they also performed gatekeeping around her son’s food habits for her. She acknowledged this when saying that she was ‘lenient’ with her son at weekends: ‘I can afford it, because I know that on weekdays, it’s super.’ This arrangement was possible because the two households lived close by and because Séverine completely adhered to her parents’ definition of a proper diet.

Second, failing to do the work properly had different consequences. Women dissatisfied with supermarket purchases and gatekeeping felt guilt and shame. They also had to face sometimes considerable conflicts, as in the case of Anne, whose mealtimes were ‘horrible’. These problems, and how they interfered with the norms of motherhood and consumption, are consistent with other studies (Beagan et al. 2008; Cairns, Johnston and MacKendrick 2013; Johnston, Szabo and Rodney 2011; Dubuisson-Quellier 2013; DeVault 1991). Yet mothers kept shopping from supermarkets and their households still derived most of their food from this source. In a sense, ‘failed’ consumption work in the supermarket still delivered food, but there was conflict over the appropriateness of that food.

In the case of other forms of provisioning, if the work was not carried out properly, it generated no food at all. Yann and Virginie (joiner and assistant nurse with two children in Les Collines) rented a semi-detached house with no garden, but a yard. They once planted tomatoes that died. Their food consumption was thus less varied and depended even more on their supermarket purchases and gatekeeping. Virginie had no contact at all with her family and Yann's parents lived abroad most of the year. Poor or inexistent interactions with the extended family prevented the sharing of work and affected consumption, depriving the household of access to garden-grown food, or making it more difficult to – for example by bulk-buying food from local producers.

Exploring the connections between food provisioning and other socioeconomic domains

How do consumption and gatekeeping work relate to 'differing socioeconomic domains' (Glucksmann 2014, 3)? As people try to carry out consumption work properly, how does it affect other their positions on other markets? We focus here on the (local) labour and property markets. Because of the nature of our study, this is more an exploratory discussion and it would deserve a more systematic analysis, yet comparing the three settings we have surveyed provides several indications.

Gatekeeping supermarket food and the labour market

In France, female employment rates are high, and our respondents' labour market positions reflected their gender and working-class status: they usually held routine, service jobs. Women's earnings made a significant contribution to the household finances, but usually they could not decide their working hours or pay someone to do their housework, and they had little chance of career advancement. This sometimes forced women to delegate gatekeeping: in Bonneville, Anne and her husband ran a bakery that opened six days a week, and Anne worked as the shop assistant every day except Thursdays and Sunday afternoons. She explained:

Sometimes I am not there [home], so I cannot see it all, but afterwards, I see the wrappers [from chocolate bars]; I ask, 'What have you done here?'... It's hard to manage. Our job is difficult, because we struggle to manage everything. And for the kids, I think it penalises them in a way: they are left to themselves, not hanging in the streets, but still, we hardly manage everything.

(Anne, runs a bakery; partner, baker; three children; Bonneville)

In contrast, Eva, who was satisfied with the way she and her partner shared the gatekeeping work, did not work on Wednesdays, when she shopped for groceries and frozen food. She valued her job for allowing her time to care for her family and had decided against promotion:

Interviewer: Do you have career ambitions?

Eva: Not so much, because my youngest daughter is only four years old. I see my colleagues who have been promoted, they work an hour away from here, and the pay is little more ... Plus, I don't want to become a manager; it's not my thing ... My mom did that and she often came home late at night, and Bruno works nightshifts, and the kids have their hobbies in the evening, so ...

(Eva, clerk; Bruno, maintenance foreman; three children; Paris area)

Eva's satisfaction with how the shopping was handled was determined partly by her decision to remain a part-time employee, allowing her to control the frozen food purchases. MacKendrick (2014, 705) suggests that mothers can be 'pushed towards the margins of normative motherhood' because of their (low) labour market position: conversely, this example and others in our study suggest that the demands of consumption work may also hinder women's occupational careers and earnings.

Provisioning food through other (local) sources: Local property market, extended family, and back to the labour market

Only some households in this study acquired food from local producers or their own or relatives' gardens: all but one in Les Collines, none in Paris and only one in Bonneville. First, accessing these forms of provisioning depended on the local property market. Our respondents were lower-class, and their housing budgets were limited: only those living in Les Collines had gardens – often because they were able to purchase a plot of land below market price from their parents' or grandparents' farm. High property prices in Bonneville and particularly in the Paris area resulted not only in homes without gardens but also a lack of local farms, preventing purchases from local producers. Supermarkets were therefore the main form of local food provisioning. Our respondents did not mention street markets as a regular form of provisioning, which is consistent with French statistics (Kranklader 2014).

Second, local food provisioning often involved the extended family, a fact that also connected food consumption to the property and labour markets. In France, while high-SES families maintain relations with geographically dispersed kinship networks, lower-status families often rely on their locally close kin, exchanging a host of services from child or elderly care to food or odd jobs (Bonvalet and Lelièvre 2016). In our study, households who received no support from extended kin (such as Yann and Virginie in Les Collines) sourced little or no food outside of supermarkets.

Staying close to the resources provided by the family network sometimes barred the way to a better position on the labour market, especially for women. Indeed, job opportunities are also geographically segmented, with qualified service jobs more frequently located in larger cities. Séverine held a Master's degree and had lived in Spain before 2008. Now a single mother she worked

as a clerk in her hometown Bonneville, « more by convenience than by choice » : her parents helped her greatly with child care and food work . Consequently, cheap properties and family networks allowed our rural respondents to obtain food from a variety of sources, but sometimes trapped them (especially women) in local labour markets. In contrast, our urban respondents were sometimes able to access better jobs, but had no forms of provisioning other than supermarkets.

Conclusion

We set out to investigate how households contribute to regulating retail food markets in the perspective of consumption work. Drawing a parallel with intermediaries in markets of cultural products, we identified this as gatekeeping. The theoretical lens of consumption work allowed us to highlight the time and effort, the uncertain outcomes and ambivalent feelings, and the organisation of labour that gatekeeping entails.

Our fieldwork included a small number of households, but explored a rather homogenous population of French working-class families, including their family networks, across three locations from small villages to the French capital. Middle-class households presumably find ethical consumption more relevant (Dubuisson-Quellier and Gojard 2016), but may also have more options for organising domestic tasks – such as paid help – and other relations with their kinship networks. Our results may therefore be specific to this population (which is in fact a large proportion of the French population). Our respondents did not consciously regulate food markets, yet they were very ‘conscientious’ (Cairns, Johnston and MacKendrick 2013) about their supermarket purchases, thus playing a de facto part in the division of the regulatory work involved.

Food studies have shown extensively that food work and consumption are very much ‘interactional’ in the sense that they involve relations of care, negotiation, control, power and sometimes conflict. Here we add to the literature in two ways. First, when investigating forms of consumption other than supermarket purchases, we found that working-class households heavily relied on, and interacted with, extended family living nearby. This is consistent with results regarding the sociology of the family, which have consistently shown that the ‘nuclear family’ is not as isolated from its extended kinship network as it may seem (Bonvalet and Lelièvre 2016; Bott 2014; Young and Willmott 1957). While food studies are capturing the interactions inside the household increasingly accurately (e.g. Beagan, Chapman et al, 2015), to our knowledge the kinship network is seldom addressed. We were able to see it because we started interviews with family trees, and tried to interview parents. It would be interesting to examine whether the role of kinship is specific to the French context, or whether its invisibility in other context is due to survey designs.

Second, consumption work – be it through gatekeeping or other forms of consumption – ties households, and especially women, to ‘differing socioeconomic domains’. It is difficult to assess the

consequences of the consumption work and gatekeeping of each household for the food market or for household food consumption. Households' positions on the labour and property markets relate to their (or often specifically their mothers') will to do their consumption work as best as they can, either by controlling purchases in supermarkets or by staying close to the extended family and its support. We certainly do not claim that women gave up their careers in order to focus on buying groceries; however, the interactional work involved in gatekeeping (before, during and after purchases), as well as in other forms of provisioning, is part of the multitude of interactions going on in the household (and in the kinship network). In the end, it contributes to reinforcing mothers' gendered identities both in their families (as providers of care and facilitators of family relations) and in the labour market.

Notes

- ¹ Race or ethnic categories are not measured in France, and their use in surveys is strictly regulated (Sabbagh and Peer 2008). It was not a selection criterion in this study.

Author biographies

Marie-Clémence Le Pape is associate professor at Lyon-II Lumière University and a member of the Max Weber Center in Lyons, France. Her research focuses on sociology of the family. She studies parenting practices in working-class households and current changes in family life.

Marie Plessz is researcher at the French national institute of agronomic research (INRA) and a member of Centre Maurice Halbwachs in Paris, France. Her research focuses on the links between social stratification, life course and social change. After studying inequalities on the labour market during the postcommunist transformation in Central-Eastern Europe, she focuses on food consumption practices.

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Declaration of interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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