Research report

# "Eat like a man". A social constructionist analysis of the role of food in men's lives ☆

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ABSTRACT

This paper adopts a social constructionist approach to investigate the role of food in the production of identities and social experiences for men. With recognition that relational and experiential processes are central to men's lives, the purpose of the paper is to inductively explore the personal and interpersonal complexities of this group's food related behaviours. Empirical data were collected through a series of semi-structured interviews with 33 men, comprising of 4 age groups, (18–35, 36–54, 55–64, and 65+ years). Regardless of age, an analysis and interpretation yielded three emergent themes, food as a component of: (1) role-play; (2) contextual interactions, (3) and the management of a functional vs. hedonic dialectic. Across these themes various tensions and contradictions emerged suggesting a complex reflexivity to male food life experiences. Relational issues emerged such as the observation that some men concede control to their partners throughout their food experiences. Overall, our men's consumption practices construct a specific socio-cultural articulation of masculine roles whereby their internal paradoxes are leveraged as a means to produce desirable experiences and self-identifications.

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## Introduction

Gender based differences in consumers' food related attitudes, beliefs, practices and life choices have become the focus of an extensive body of research and speculation in recent years (Gough, 2007; Sobal, 2005). Concurrently, the fervour with which social theorists have pursued the notion of gender in the food area has been replicated by industry decision makers as exemplified by the growing use of gender in food advertising and promotions (Childs & Maher, 2003). Nevertheless, despite the upsurge of interest in gender and food related behaviours various authors have recognised that studies concentrating specifically on *men's* lived experiences with food are still quite rare (Gough & Conner, 2006; Melanson, 2008). Women are largely regarded to be more involved in domestic food work than their male counterparts (Fürst, 1997) and consequently men, as a unit of analysis, have been studied less frequently.

As it stands however, there are issues beyond involvement which should attract attention to the food consumption of male consumers. Men outnumber females in their susceptibility to obesity, heart disease hypertension, and cancer (Flint et al., 2010). In addition, morbidity statistics indicate that men on a global scale tend to lead less healthy lifestyles than women, and engage in far less health-promoting behaviours (Devaney, 2008).

Investigative work into men's self-representations and their interaction with social groups, within which their selves are embedded, may aid in shedding light on men's relationship with food and any latent health risks. Bisogni, Connors, Devine, and Sobal (2002), have theorised 'identity' and 'personal history' as key informants of food choice while recent empirical studies have shown 'social interaction' to instil food products with deep seated symbolic meanings for consumers (Cronin & McCarthy, 2011; Cronin, McCarthy, & Collins, 2012). Research however which examines how men use food to represent their individual selves and to aid in the production of interpersonal relationships and encounters with others is lacking. The purpose of this paper is to inductively explore the complexities of men's food behaviours as embedded in expressions of identity and the search for social experience. Specifically, this paper sets out to empirically reveal how men use food in their personal and collective performances and as a grounding force for self-expression.

### Men, masculinity and food. A background

As an initial point of establishing theoretical foundations, the social constructionist perspective is a useful viewpoint from which we can interrogate the lived experiences of men with food. This

perspective emphasises its dependence on contingent aspects of consumers' social selves and asserts behaviours and objects of consciousness develop through social performances (Danzinger, 1997). These social performances are everyday interactions or considerations amongst individuals who exercise their conduct either individually or among others by negotiating and enacting cultural scripts (Vannini, 2008). Individuals can be completely unaware that their performances are scripted and faithfully enacted, that their roles are collectively determined, and that fellow interactants constitute an audience for their actions. It is according to this dramatised system of social programming, that it is theorised men enact behaviours closely prescribed by the concept of 'masculinity' assumed from their culture (Courtenay, 2000b). Importantly, gender does not dwell in the person, but resides in social transactions defined as gendered (Crawford, 1995).

The dominant form of socially constructed masculinity, hegemonic masculinity, tends to subordinate femininity and other forms of masculinity (Courtenay, 2000a), and is said to be the 'masculine ideal'. It refers to the most honoured ideas about manhood, whereby men tend to be positioned by society as strong and resistant to disease, while a concern for health is typically looked upon as feminine behaviour (Connell, 2000; Lee & Owens, 2002).

Men who adopt these hegemonic beliefs tend to subscribe to traditionalist gendered expectations of risk-taking behaviour, a denial of weakness and reluctance to seek help, all of which have the potential to exacerbate health problems (Courtenay, 2000a). Particularly, these beliefs have been associated with unhealthy behaviours, which include smoking, alcohol and drug use and behaviours connected to safety, diet and sexual practices (Eisler, Skidmore, & Ward, 1988; McCreary, Newcomb, & Sadava, 1999). The gendering of foods serves as a mechanism in buttressing the presence of hegemonic masculinity. Food practices help men confirm and subscribe to traditionalist tastes of manhood thereby allowing the construction of strong male identities and relationships (Jensen & Holm, 1999; Roos, Prättälä, & Koski, 2001). Alcohol products, for example, serve as indicators of maleness in various cultures whereas consumption of vegetables, fruits and sweet foods is disregarded as feminine (Roos, Hirvonen, Mikkila, Karvonen, & Rimpela, 2001). Men are considered to be less likely than women to avoid fat, eat fibre, eat fruit and diet, and attached less thought to healthy eating (Wardle et al., 2004) while being motivated to consume more protein and vitamins (Levi, Chan, & Pence, 2006). Red meat, for example, with its high protein content and bloody constitution has been found to represent for men a totem of virility and strength (Adams, 1990; Fiddes, 1991; Rozin, Hormes, Faith, & Wansink, 2012). Sobal (2005) extends empirical work into this symbolism of meat for men by taking into account their social relationships with others. He suggests that marital meat consumption does not necessarily follow formulaic, hegemonic gender patterns and that, instead, pluralistic views of masculinities offer adjectival gender scripts that can be selectively invoked in negotiating meals shared between partners: "*Multiple cultural scripts for strong men, healthy men, wealthy men, sensitive men, and other conceptions of masculinities are employed in marital negotiations about "doing meat"* (Sobal, 2005, p. 135)".

Sobal's argument demands attention as the existence of multiple cultural scripts dilutes the argument for pre-determination of male roles and muddies the waters when it comes to social constructionism of food choices. There is an implicit argument of emancipative relativity which suggests rigidly defined structures of 'singular masculinity', which assume the dominance of one set of male norms in a particular society and historical period, is giving away to the perspective of 'multiple masculinities,' which assume plural conceptions of maleness in a society and time period (Sobal, 2005). This pluralistic perspective recognises that there is a fragmentation and diversity of social performances in late-modern consumer soci-

ety and this heterogeneity brings with it a diversity of cultural scripts for particular actions (e.g. Connell, 1995, 2000). Moreover, outside of the food literature, Holt and Thompson (2004) theorise that there are contradictions inherent within the hegemonic model which further complicates and diversifies the heterogeneity of 'multiple masculinities'. Holt and Thompson suggest men who strive for domination and respect are conflicted between the ideals of "what is a real man's man?" They suggest there is a complicated balancing act between the "breadwinner ideal" (i.e. a veneration of monetary earnings, achievement and professionalisation) and the 'rebel ideal' (i.e. chauvinist, rugged individualism and displays of physical prowess). The authors suggest men use these two competing masculine ideals to socially construct 'dramatic pleasurable tensions' (Thompson & Holt, 2004). 'Dramatic' here does not infer ostentatious or the histrionic but implies men engage in role-play as per the thespian sense of the word. Men's resolution of role-play tensions help men win patriarchal status games on their own terms and deepens the waters of social constructionist theory. Their argument can be conceptualised as a recognition that men's masculinities are often faced with many contradictions that must be reconciled by displaying in some ways that one is in control.

There has been some theoretical convergence with Holt and Thompson's argument across the social sciences whereby the plurality of various alternative masculinities forms the basis of late-modern hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 1995; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Within this understanding, masculinities are thought of as configurations of practices (Connell, 2005) that are created relationally in the various social interactions that exist between men and within the wider context of gender (Connell, 2005). From this perspective, gender is often seen as a dynamic, social structure whereby men are not powerlessly conditioned by their surrounding cultures, they are active agents in building, renegotiating and reconstructing dominant norms of masculinity. This concept of agency, which is the role people play in exerting power and autonomy in their individual lives, is central to most recent forms constructionist theory and forms a primary assumption in the current research (Courtenay, 2000b).

With recognition that there is heterogeneity, complexity and contradictory ideals within the broad structural category of "men", we are left with an insightful point of departure for analyses of this cohort. This paper seeks to contribute to our understanding men's food experiences and reveal some of the individual and social processes by which they interact with food in the construction of identity.

## Methods

The research presented here is grounded within a larger national quantitative study (the National Adult Nutrition Survey) documenting the diets and lifestyle patterns of Irish Citizens. Having completed a food diary a lifestyle survey and a food choice survey, all participants from 5 of the 25 sampling points used in the national survey were invited by the researcher during the last of three visits, to partake in an interview to speak about their food lives. Those who agreed were contacted and a time for interview was set up. In-depth semi-structured interviews were selected as a suitable method as they have been shown to be effective in revealing how food consumption patterns are associated with symbolic meanings and social patterns (Kleine & &. Hubbert, 1993). From 146 men invited, 33 men agreed to participate in an in-depth interview, representing a 22% response rate. With this sample size we were confident of reaching data saturation (Guest, Arwen, & Johnson, 2006). The sample was designed to maximise diversity across key demographic characterises such as age, (4 groups: 18–35, 36–54, 55–64, and 65+ years; mean age = 72), social status, living location (urban/rural) and weight status. All interviews took place

in the informants' homes within one month of completing the other elements of the larger study. This ensured informants were at an optimal level of recollection of their past and current food patterns and thus in a position to reflect on these patterns. It should be noted that at the time of the interviews the food diary data was not available to or used by the interviewer. Ethical approval was sought and received from the University Ethics Committee.

The interviews were conducted by a trained field researcher (female, in her late twenties, with a master's degree in Food Marketing). To minimise potential interview bias, the first two interviews were observed and the audio copies were scrutinised for dependability by other members of the research team. These interviews also served as the pilot. On-going discussion and review of the audio files occurred during the data collection phase. Interviews lasted from between 40 and 75 min (average duration of 60 min). All of the audio-taped interviews were transcribed verbatim and verified for accuracy. A life-course perspective guided the design of the interview discourses (Wethington & Johnson-Askew, 2009). This facilitated consideration of food choices within the broader social and economic contexts and a focus on continuity and change across the food life-course (Devine, Connors, Bisogni, & Sobal, 1998). The approach allowed informants to reflect on what they considered as the main factors that influenced their food choices and thus understand the major influences on food motives and behaviours. The interview questions were phrased so as not to prime responses from the participants, thus, they were purposively kept open-ended, which offers greater flexibility for participants to shed light on relevant issues. Questions related to personal food history, food choices in contexts and the roles and functions enacted around food were used.

The data was interrogated, compiled and categorised using a thematic analysis approach. The procedures for performing this analysis followed the guidelines recommended by Braun and Clarke (2006) and Spiggle (1994). Under the recommendations of Spiggle, wherever possible the data was integrated with concepts and theories from the literature for aiding explanatory power and the scholarly conceptualisation of naturalistic behaviours. While Guest et al. (2006) report that "stability" can occur with as few as 12 in-depth interviews; the consideration of a structural cohort as broad and heterogeneous as "men" dictated a wider breadth in observations. The research team thereby aimed to analyse the much larger, complete data pool of 33 discourses to ensure a holistic representation of various masculinities, social phenomena and enacted identities would be observable. It was found that no new themes emerged upon coding the final transcript; thus establishing confidence in theoretical saturation. Trustworthiness of the analysis was affirmed through member checks carried out informally during interviews and more formally after drafting an early report (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The software package NVivo was used to support management of the large data set and the analysis.

## Results

In applying a constructionist orientation to investigate the meanings and experiences of food for men, three major themes emerge: (1) Food in the use of role-play; (2) Contextual interactions; (3) and Downplaying consumption: functional vs. hedonic dialectic. A recurring motif of *tension* or *conflict* became a structural construct across these themes. Specifically, it was detected that there is often dialectical tensions at play within men's experiences with food which spark interesting tactics or negotiations in their resolution.

### Food in the enactment of role-play

A reinvention process of the 'self' was played out in this study through the masculine identities constructed being bolstered by attitudes and actions towards food. The data purports that while men's overall personal food systems are stable their patterns of behaviours are driven by context. The 'who' and 'what' role being enacted provide a frame for the sets of foods that are consumed suggesting that food choices serve as a subtle yet symbolically charged prop by which men can shuffle through their role identities. Men will consume certain products around certain people and will constantly try to imagine how other people interpret users of these specific products. This enactment of multiple roles can be grounded in the literature of symbolic interactionism which asserts that social roles and meanings evolve out of interaction between people (Solomon, 1983). Indeed, while many social roles are situated outside of the home; our first theme is concerned with the enactment of a personal masculine identity (supermen) and two role identities (parent and husband) that are situated within the home. Tensions between these sometimes conflicting roles are evident.

### "Supermen". Food in the role of raucous, agentic masculinity

A large aggregate of the discursive data indicated that men ideally strive for a patriarchal role within the household anchored in displays of strength, appetite and autonomy. We can ground this body of primary work in the literature by referring to Holt and Thompson (2004). They suggest that men will negotiate rebellious undertones into their working lives through everyday consumption and discourse around what they consume to maintain a sense of masculinity. This display of rugged individualism or expression of a chauvinistic role was seen to be strategically intertwined with men's food stories throughout the interviews. Men's experiences with food emerged as being linked to enactment of their subjective views of themselves as ideally autonomous, physically strong 'men': "*I don't know how girls are and do girls tend to watch their figure and everything else but fellas just burn it off and a lot of that's down to just running around and thinking they're supermen [laughs] and they can do whatever they want [laughs]*" (David, 51–64). Here we see David is positioning the feminine as "other", what females do with their food and diet is none of his concern nor is it something he claims to have any real knowledge about. He dismisses their behaviours as cosmetic oriented; as a superficial motive "to watch their figure". He frames this motivation as alien to men who he believes are driven by body instrumentality, i.e. equating food with burning energy to complete tasks which allows them to become these ideal "supermen". To be a superman is to achieve dominance, to subscribe to the hegemonic model. Another one of our men follows this subscription by equating his food shopping to nothing more than the virile sourcing of meat largely typified as a real man's practice: "*Over all the years I'm the guy that always shops for the meat, she never goes to the butcher shop, I always go [smiles]*" (Neil, 51–64). Sourcing meat and the sourcing of alcohol for special occasions such as Christmas parties were largely elicited by our participants as jobs they do voluntarily and in their own time independent to the shopping practices of their wives. By leveraging stereotypical displays of manliness in food such as valuing meat, sourcing alcohol and offsetting food intake with energy expenditure men are largely enacting a perhaps idealised action oriented raucous masculinity.

Traditionally, men are assumed to possess a voracious appetite (Monaghan, 2005) and this is a masculine trait alluded to throughout the reflections, largely valuing yet not necessarily adhere to this: "*I eat less but we still give [son] the same young manly portions [laughs] because he'd eat twelve slices of bread, young men just can't feed them enough, it doesn't matter what you do*" (David, 51–64).

Some confirm their masculine identity by being adventurous when it comes to choosing foods. This apparent risk-taking corresponds to the daring or adventuresome nature of the traditional male (Courtenay, 2000a, 2000b) thereby helping them to conform

to and construct their role as the archetypal men: "*I don't mind taking a chance…I can eat practically anything and it doesn't bother me and that doesn't surprise me*" (Kieran, 36–50). This discourse demonstrates the role of food in displaying agency, leadership or individuality which are tenets of a dominant male. Kieran's expression of voluntary risk-taking and his claims to take to any food dramatises himself as a "rebel male" (Holt & Thompson, 2004).

### "Brilliant parent". Food in the role of domestic masculinity

While the above theme attests to men's positioning of selves as raucous "super men" driven by personal autonomy, the data highlighted a conflict for some men in enacting this role when faced with the necessity of playing the more sensible caring role of husband or father. Marriage/cohabitation emerged as a turning point in some men's eating habits: some seem to enter into this union with their own unique food preferences, which often differ somewhat to their partners.

Marriage/cohabitation also results in the adaption of eating habits, to fit with their partner's preferences: "*You had heavier meals definitely and I think like all people when they get married first you probably put on a bit of weight*" (Declan, 51–64). This finding corresponds to Bove, Sobal, and Rauschenbach (2003) where convergence of food choices is a strong effect of a committed marital relationship. The negotiation of food preferences is seen as an important element in adjusting the relationship, with food negotiations originally being complex and mindful whereas later being routine and automatic.

The complexity of the 'parent role' features prominently in adjustments to men's diets. Food choices are tailored to fit with the preferences (in some cases this was a negative influence) and the requirements (due to health related problems) of their offspring. In several cases, the parents' diet appears to be guided by the preferences of their children, a phenomenon that has sometimes been conceptualised in the literature as "reverse socialisation" (Ayadi, 2008). For some, the parental role seems to impact on the acquisition of food and particularly the role food now plays with their lives: "*when we didn't have kids we might have grabbed something and gone out, cause we were both working so we grabbed stuff up in the shop on the way and threw it on*" (Barry, 36–50). Within the household, eating dinner together becomes a prop by men and facilitated by their partner as a way to construct the family unit and embed themselves within it as a figurehead. Sharing foods at the table seemed to symbolise the unity of the family and appeared to provide a unique platform to socialise, an occasion to be relished as is evidenced by the following quote: "*At family occasions there's always an eating session, socialising is always a food thing*" (George, 36–50). George's labelling of the consumption occasion as a "session" marks it as a collective ritual that celebrates togetherness and shared experience.

Men's role as "father" appears to elevate their self-efficacy in terms of food skills and appears to heighten their awareness for a healthy diet. Some men recount 'trading in' their raucous ideal to consume heavily and voraciously for a pedestrian safe diet when children became part of the family unit. A transition in their lifestage is mirrored with a transition in terms of their food behaviours. The participant 'Barry' relieves some of the tension in doing so by explaining his behaviour in a self-deprecating manner, jokingly passing off his sacrifice as a "brilliant" act: "*Typical brilliant young parent willingly gave up everything for the children [laughs] as required. Then with the children as well we were conscious of what they were eating*" (Barry, 36–50). Domestic acts of caring and setting an example for offspring are typically considered as feminised behaviours (Gilligan, 1982) but we see here that Barry is subtly reconciling the moral drama of including these responsibilities in his personal food system. While he is initially flippant in his framing of this decision as a "brilliant act", overall he appears to embrace the masculine position of what Holt and Thompson (2004) describe as "a selfless hero", for whom "doing for others is the key to respectability and the moral way to prove one's manhood" (p. 434). By ensuring there are correct dietary provisions for his children, he is possibly digressing from the agentic raucous "superman" role that is favoured by many others in the sample and opting instead for this alternate caring masculinity. Further evidence of self-sacrifice was found elsewhere in our sample which suggests men with children use a feminine sensibility of caring in their food lives as a counter-hegemonic resource to set themselves up as selfless heroes.

### Managing "the wife". Matriarchal domination and voluntary subordination

A self-defining sub-theme became apparent in the data, centred on the role that women play in men's food consumption. Specifically, the relational behaviours, perceived authority and responsibilities of a significant female in their lives emerge as a central influence on men's interaction with food. Interestingly, while at no point did the data indicate extenuating emasculation of the male consumers, it does suggest men readily concede a large level of control, involvement and processes associated with meal-related tasks to their female counterparts. This sub-theme will address how males voluntarily cease to claim agency over their food behaviours and how they negotiate the tensions between being subordinate to their female counterparts in meal preparation while still maintaining an acceptable sense of prepotence in themselves.

Many men describe not being involved in meal planning, shopping and cooking. Many respond "*the/my wife*" when asked which person in the family home prepares and cooks food. In fact some renounce food chores and adopt a secondary, submissive role, whereby their spouses take the lead in food choices, and preparation. Across the discourses, men recurrently reiterate that they feel they are at the behest of their wives' cooking, whereby they have to eat the meal that is prepared.

Wives appear to take on the role of caretaker in the family, whereby they encourage health behaviours and manage the family's health. "*She has maintenance in that department…That's the boss [wife], [laughs]; I don't get involved in the kitchen, keep out of it. [Wife] would do the shopping. Now if I ever request something she'd have a look for it, but I wouldn't often interfere*" (Kieran, 36–50). The term "*boss*" here implies what some authors have conceptualised as 'authoritarian supervision of food practices' (Nicklas et al., 2001; Vereecken, Keukelier, & Maes, 2003). Kieran feels that he is a disruptive force and distances themselves from meal-related tasks. There is a conscious decision by this informant to grant power to his wife over his eating practices, he accepts a voluntary surrender of his own free will. This alludes to a tension at play within men's interaction with food vis-à-vis a significant female; that matriarchal governance is perhaps welcomed and embraced by men.

In seeking to ground men's relationship with food preparation vis-à-vis their partner, Thompson and Holt (2004) posit men "abdicate control over aspects of their domestic lives to a nurturing other (generally their wives) and to enjoy being cared for, while relinquishing any strong sense of personal responsibility or need to achieve" (p. 334). Interrogation of our own data finds that our men correspond to this supposition; that there is a benign oppression at work. Generally the men seem to voluntarily cede control to their wives, content to assume a subservient role: "*She'd ask me what I eat…I'd have no clue…she does all that. I'd be lost*" (Sam, 36–50). Sam's suggestion that he would be "lost" captures the prevailing attitude of our men: that they are *dependent* on the governance of a significant other in meal preparation. While many men initially lament their freedom to eat what they want, they do however celebrate that there is a provider of food. Some stress

the view that their wives' superior skills and efficiency around food far outweighed their own. While they are being out powered by their female counterparts' prowess in the kitchen, they welcome this defeat and voluntarily take a back seat to food matters. Wives' skills are regaled and celebrated by men through recounting tales of their wives' successes with cooking: "*She's a natural cook…she would have done cordon blue cooking courses…she would have won a fish cookery competition*" (David, 51–64). However, in order to appease what could be mistaken as sycophancy and to reassert their prepotency, men justified their celebration of their wives' involvement by positioning any male involvement as a taboo area. Particularly, many participants denounce the notion of men actively engaging in food chores as something which is peculiar and outside the norm: "*There are a couple of men funnily enough that like the kitchen and like to cook*" (Barry, 36–50). Barry's reasoning here is representative of a large battery of dismissive and frivolous responses by the interview sample to the 'manliness' of cooking. Discourse is identified as a central weapon in our men's arsenal of defence against being 'outdone' by female counterparts in this area. Collectively, discourse is used to position meal-related tasks as a "woman's job", as something important and to certainly be praised but not something "a man would do". By positioning the activities as intrinsically feminine men are leveraging the traditionalist hegemonic model, in the defence of their lack of involvement in meal preparation thereby reconciling their self-imposed subordination.

### Contextual Interactions

#### "The meat and two veg man". Food and culture

Looking beyond the micro-unit of the family, and into the wider cultural context, the data indicates a strong interplay between the consumption of individual males and the shared meanings, cultural traditions and ways of life that prevail amongst men of their life-stage. Some of the older men were raised in an age where they were told what to eat and had to eat what was served to them during mealtimes. Their personal food preferences are seemingly rendered redundant since many were children at a time when food availability was relatively scarce, and there was not the same ubiquity of choices that exists today: "*We think about the recession now, but I grew up in poverty, and I would be the first one to admit that. The food we had was very basic…wouldn't have had a great nutritional value. But it was food! And that was all it was*" (Joe, 65+). We appreciate here in Joe's quote, shared experiences of frugality with others in his generation have lead him to conform to a culture of "voluntary simplicity" (Huneke, 2004) or to a shared sense of austerity in food practices.

Associating oneself with an ethnic tradition of eating seems to strengthen older men's sense of personal and cultural identities, where they reject the influx of "foreign" foods and hold the virtues of the basic traditional Irish meal: "*I would have very much the meat and two veg man and the plain Irish food with no flavours*" (Paul, 51–64). A contradicting culture of consumption to the traditionalism and austerity of the older male bracket was identified amongst the younger generations of men. This is a further instance of a conflict or tension that exists between the traditional foods versus the modern.

One young man alludes to a shared predilection for modern, hedonic products far removed from staple Irish fare: "*It's just my kind of generation eats just crap, fizzy drinks and junk food*" (Padraig, 18–35). His labelling of the socio-typical consumption patterns of those in his generation as "crap" indicates a conscious understanding of the poor nutrition of his choices. The culture of consumption surrounding these choices however is often mandated by the context of the culture or the physical and social environment males find themselves in (Sellaeg & Chapman, 2008). This is elicited

clearly by a participant who draws reference to his food habits when he left home "*I went to university so that was probably the introduction to ready meals; food wasn't a priority at all*" (Seamus, 36–50). The traditional values that some older men hold seem to stem from their own traditional upbringing, where they were generally raised on fresh, plain food, which dispose them to seek the same for their own families. This inter-generational influence is central to their personal food schemas and affects their overall outlook on food and nutrition. The environment where shared dedication and balance between social activities and busy work-life occurs is a site where food behaviours are adapted to match those around them. This feeds into the next inter-connected sub-theme which considers peer influence.

#### Peer influence

Reference to peer groups emerged strongly from the data as an influence on Irish men's dietary habits. Association with a social network or comparison of oneself to a set of referents seems to strengthen men's food identities, and offers a means of coordinating their food choices and preferences. Some male participants claims that their friends, or men of a similar age, share the same attitudes towards food and consume similar types and amounts of foods as they do "*I was probably never adventurous about food and probably my friends are the same, cause we're all around the one age group, I think we all eat pretty similar type of food*" (Paul, 51–64). Fox (2003) suggests this compliance to group norms stems from consumer beliefs that not knowing how to eat properly can be perceived as a sign of outsider status.

Some men articulate the social normative pressures which frame situated consumption practices: "*When I am with my friends, I wouldn't picture myself eating vegetables*", "*if I was at my ma's (mothers) house, I would eat whatever is put in front of me…but once you are with your friends, you don't really think about what you are eating, you just get whatever*" (John, 18–35). Eating healthy is not seen by John as a behaviour that he would engage in, within the company of peers. This issue of conflict arises here once again. The individual versus the collective creates contradictions around food consumption at the level of conforming to the group identity and the tensions that exist between being located 'inside the group', and being alone.

By way of contrast, recognition of the group influence can provide opportunity to stand and enhance masculine identity. Padraig exemplifies this: "*so depending on the company I am with, they would be slightly strayed (from engaging in healthy eating) but again I'd never just eat a burger and chips because someone else is*" (Padraig, 18–35). He views himself as impervious to the influence exerted by his own social grouping. This discourse demonstrates the role of food in displaying agency, leadership or individuality which are tenets of a dominant male. His failure to conform dramatises himself as a "rebel male" (Holt & Thompson, 2004), further providing empirical support for the use of food in the construction of multiple masculinities.

#### Downplaying consumption. Functional vs. hedonic dialectic

What is fascinating about the men sampled is that there is a clear dynamic of tension or uneasiness at work with regard to deriving enjoyment from food. Our men tend to equate eating with either of two contrasting meanings: some participants speak at a concrete level, stressing the functional aspects of food "*I suppose survival*"; "*it's just that your body needs food*" (Shane, 65+). These men view eating as instrumental to ensuring that they remain active and healthy and thus eating is seen as a necessary act "*keep my body going now at the moment and that you have to take in x amount of whatever, of calories per day to keep the body functioning properly*" (Eoin, 36–50). Others speak of the enjoyment and happiness that

food brings them as they appear to derive pleasure from the experience of eating. In relation to those men who perceive themselves to be healthy eaters, they seem to attach various positive "*feelings*" to food, whereby "*feeling healthier*" and "*feeling less tired*" emerge as some health benefits from eating well. While such functional undertones arguably tie into body instrumentality and thereby correspond with masculine domains, men would sometimes derive hedonic pleasures from the more sensory aspects of food. The taste and flavours of meals are all highlighted as dominant factors in food choice. "*I love the flavours…I like to enjoy what I'm eating, it's important to me that I enjoy the flavours*" (Declan, 51–64). Across the 4 age groups, the enjoyment attached to food is evident. While being offset against the discourse of dispassionate sustenance, maintaining strong health and its moralistic asceticism, these hedonic pleasures are experienced as moderate transgressions. Feminised aspects of food such as those associated with sensations, presentation and variety are recognised as 'unmanly' temptations. Specifically, our men experience hedonic indulgence as a near irresistible force that regularly threatens to 'draw' or 'entice' them into 'unproductive' emotionally motivated consumption occasions. For example, for some, food is seen to mean "*addiction*" as illustrated in this comment, "*an addiction kind of, you need food to survive but I feel I'm always thinking about it*" (John, 18–35). Deriving enjoyment from food is experienced with almost a sense of taboo among some men, which corresponds to a traditionalist hegemonic narrative of men's struggle against temptation (Thompson & Holt, 2004).

For some, there is an active consideration to reconcile their enjoyment of food, that they must hideaway what could be considered weakness from being 'pulled' into feminised interests. This is typically enacted through what we conceptualise as "downplayed consumption" where men attempt to downplay their pleasures from meals as hegemonically rationalised. Downplayed consumption is achieved in a number of ways. Firstly, they emphasise that when they do derive enjoyment from food, it is only occasionally, and in social situations most typically when they are seated as head of the family dinner table. Secondly, there is also a preference for meat products, large portions and the use of alcohol during meals. Third, when they do derive enjoyment from food, they usually refer to such behaviour in a self-critical manner. "*I could do better if I'd plan what I'm going to do for the week, next week. Then you can prepare the night before, when sitting in front of the TV*" (Sean, 18–35) or by overcompensating for their enjoyment with physical activity which would cancel out any ill-effects of over-indulging or consuming a hedonistic meal: "*I do a lot of sport but I eat a lot as well so it kind of wipes it out*" (Adam, 18–35). Within this downplaying strategy, hedonism in food is also framed as sometimes offering a means of maintaining personal security, "*It's very important, it's everything, good food, clean, warm home, that's what it's all about*" (James, 65+). One participant also suggests his 'coming of age' i.e. the maturation process gave him licence to enjoy food. As a young man, food only played a functional role, whereas now, as an older man, he has earned the right to express a finer appreciation of food, "*when I was growing up [food] just served a function, filled the stomach…it's only when you become more in tune [with your body] and mature that you appreciate it*" (Paul, 51–64). Finally men downplay their hedonic consumption by simplifying their tastes and rationalising their enjoyment as coming from only the basic pleasures in food: "*I wouldn't like the idea of being over exaggerated and over emphasised you know, all this arty stuff about food, the cooking stuff, so I think it's an essential part of your existence alright and you should eat well but not to exaggerate or overdo it*" (Frank, 65+).

## Discussion

Tensions and contradictions often complicate one single angle of interpretation suggesting unique complexities to male food life experiences and highlight the heterogeneity that exists among men. These tensions emerged as triggers that collate and interact in the development of men's food related behaviour. In some cases, there are dialectical tensions at play which result in discursive tactics and negotiations to reconcile their secondary role in meal-related tasks. These tensions revolve around the roles men enact in their everyday lives. Their food consumption practices construct a specific socio-cultural articulation of masculine roles whereby their internal paradoxes are leveraged as a means to produce desirable experiences and self-identifications.

Food in the enactment of role-play displays the dialectical conflict that was found to exist between the socially constructed ideal of masculinity versus the more subdued domestic masculinity. These men display their masculinities in various contexts where they adhere to the traditionalist ideals of being adventurous and displaying agency while also assuming a more feminised domestic masculinity, willing to sacrifice their food wants to appease the family. This is in keeping with Holt and Thompson (2004) where men avail of two competing masculine ideals to produce pleasurable tensions.

Men tailored their food habits in accordance with their roles as men, husbands and fathers. Living with a partner and children impacted on the types of foods they ate. These findings echo the work of Brown and Miller (2002) which examined how couples managed food preferences and food skills learnt in the parental home and their own personal experiences impacted on the food preferences acceptable to each partner. Eating with others was considered an ideal food context, where the food preparation became an event in itself (Devine, Sobal, Bisogni, & Connors, 1999; Sellaeg and Chapman (2008).

The men ceded food control and ceased to claim agency as they adopted a passive stance that allowed them to abdicate control over their food lives. They enjoy being cared for, while relinquishing any sense of responsibility. While changes in men's role within food and masculinities are being recognised within this cohort, women continue to be primarily involved and responsible for most of the food work. This revelation stands in contrast to the assumptions of emerging evidence which highlight women's increased involvement in employment outside of the home (e.g. Russell, McGinnity, Callan, & Keane, 2009).

A conflict between the "personal" and the "peer group" was evident with a persistent impact of the collective upon the individual. The prevailing culture and traditions were embedded in the food beliefs for some, where a traditional diet was promoted. Associating oneself with a food tradition appears to play a role in their food behaviours and creates a sense of identity. This finding corroborates research where some people still hold on to certain traditional methods of cooking and eating (Devine et al., 1999; Satia-Abouta, Patterson, Neuhouser, & Elder, 2002).

Referent peer groups strengthens these men's food identities and offer them a reference point for their food behaviours, while sometimes creating a conflict between the individual wants versus the perceived collective norm. This is evident in Wade and Brittan-Powell (2000) where men experience psychological relatedness to men whom they view as possessing similar diets to themselves.

Men downplayed their hedonic consumption. There is a distinct dynamic of tension or uneasiness at work when deriving enjoyment from food. They tended to equate eating with two contrasting meanings. Some spoke of the functional aspects of food. Others pointed at the need to fuel their bodies allowing them to fulfil functional needs. This mechanistic approach to food has been seen in Roos & Prättälä et al. (2001). At a more symbolic level however, they equated food with enjoyment yet this was sometimes experienced with a sense of taboo, which corresponds to a hegemonic narrative of men's struggle against temptation (Holt & Thompson, 2004). For some, there was a consideration to reconcile

their enjoyment of food, that they must hideaway what could be considered weakness from involvement in traditional feminised interests.

*Study limitations*

There are limitations that must be considered. Firstly, we recognise that there is limited generalisability to the wider population. This research was part of a larger nutrition study that looked at general food consumption, and these participants had completed a detailed 4 day food diary prior to participating in the reflective interviews. This could result in a more dramatised discourse around food. Secondly, participants' may have been influenced by the identity of the interviewer. The interviews were conducted by a female researcher, who they knew to be involved in food research. This knowledge may have prompted the participants to talk more positively about the roles and actions around food and communicate a more feminised approach to food.

*Conclusions and implications*

Overall, this paper has highlighted the complexity of men's relationship with food. We need to acknowledge that tensions and conflicts exist in both men's identities and their enacted consumption behaviours. The contradictions bear witness to the dynamic interplay of various identities and masculinities and the teasing out of these tensions may open the channels for further understanding of men's food behaviour. More research is required to accommodate the complex range of masculinities and to acknowledge potential significant differences between and within groups of men.

Nevertheless, coupled with theories of behavioural change, the insights made here may have implications for informing promotional efforts which encourage responsible food related behaviours among men. Particularly, the findings emphasise the importance of taking the wider socio-cultural context, relational influences and role-play enactment into consideration when promoting healthy eating to men. Furthermore it is important here to understand that the existence of various masculinities and role personas may prove problematic for health professionals in communicating effectively with a male audience. As one commentator asserts, "What's good for the goose may gag the gander" (Dortch 1994).

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