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Confident, Fearful and Hopeless Cooks: Findings from **the
development of a Food-Skills Initiative**

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Confident, Fearful and Hopeless Cooks: Findings from a Food-Skills Initiative

ABSTRACT

One of the many barriers to a healthier diet in low-income communities is a presumed lack of practical food skills. This article reports findings from exploratory qualitative research conducted with potential participants in a cooking skills intervention, in low income communities in Scotland. The research found widely varying levels of skill and confidence regarding cooking, supported the need for a community-based intervention approach, and demonstrated the importance of consumer research to inform the content of interventions. It also challenges the view that low income communities lack skills, suggesting that food skills should be defined more broadly than ‘cooking from scratch’. Other barriers to healthy eating, such as poverty, food access and taste preferences, remain important.

KEY WORDS

Cooking; skills; qualitative; low income / deprivation / social exclusion

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BACKGROUND

The need to increase the intake of fruit and vegetables, fibre-rich starchy carbohydrates and fish is well recognised but many people are failing to put these dietary changes into practice (The Scottish Office, 1996; Scottish Executive, 2001, [National Consumer Council, 2003](#)). A low practical food skills base may limit intake in relation to the preparation of basic foods. There is a possible double jeopardy effect for those on low incomes without food skills, who cannot buy themselves out of the dilemma as readily as can those on high incomes.

This article describes the **exploratory qualitative research** conducted to inform the content of an intervention designed to address this low food skills base among low income communities. The intervention, called Cookwell, is a community-based, food skills initiative, consisting of a series of practical cookery classes run in a community setting. It aims to improve the nutritional quality of the diets of participants and their families, specifically by encouraging increased consumption of fibre-rich starchy carbohydrates, fish, vegetables and fruit and decreasing consumption of fat, among adults living in areas of deprivation. Between 2000-2002, Cookwell courses were run in 8 disadvantaged communities across Scotland based on the findings from the initial needs assessment reported here.

Designing and implementing successful health interventions for socially disadvantaged people necessitates building on existing community projects and avoiding a ‘top down’ approach. In many areas of social disadvantage, local food projects such as ‘*Get Cooking!*’ (National Food Alliance, 1993) and national campaigns as run by the **Royal Society of Arts [Martin, in full]** (1997 and 1998) have developed to address barriers to progressing dietary change. These vary in success, but community ownership (where local people are regarded as partners) has been

described as a key feature and an important factor in the design of projects targeted at disadvantaged communities (Cabinet Office, 1998). It is recognised that dealing with any one barrier to dietary change is unlikely radically to alter dietary behaviour which will have developed over a lifetime, [or change or influence structural barriers to healthy eating](#). But pilot studies suggest that food skills interventions may be a useful starting point for initiating dietary change. They may in turn lead onto the development of other issues such as self esteem or enhancing community capacity to set up community co-ops or food delivery schemes (Caraher and Lang, 1995; Dobson, Kellard and Talbot, 2000).

A pan-European study found that the time needed for food preparation was identified as a barrier to healthy eating (Institute of European Food Studies, 1996). Britons have the ‘fastest’ food habits in Europe and eating ‘on the hoof’ is a growing feature, with entire new industries such as sandwich shops and coffee bars servicing the trend ([Millstone and Lang, 2003](#)) [\[Martin, needs sources/refs\]](#). The diversification of food provision through the growing availability and acceptability of ready prepared foods, take-aways and the home meal replacement dishes have raised the stakes for those promoting cooking in a busy world. For many the issue is ‘why cook?’, when there are other options available. Any intervention seeking to promote cooking must address issues of convenience and time, hence the importance of ascertaining the needs of the target audience.

Cooking Skills and Health: Any Relationship?

There is some evidence that cooking classes or training programmes which are multifaceted in their approach, and which operate within a health-promoting settings

approach, may influence behaviour in the short term (Bostock, 1993; Demas, 1995; Kennedy and Ling, 1997; Caraher and Lang, 1995; Dobson, Kellard and Talbot, 2000). In addition, borrowing from the concept of relative poverty leads us to hypothesise that acquisition and knowledge of food preparation skills are necessary to guard against what Crotty (1999) calls '*food insufficiency*'. This may mean that a low-income family, for example, may be well nourished from a nutritional perspective, but experience deprivation through a lack of access to 'highly valued foods' or the lack of key food preparation skills (Lang and Caraher, 2001). Cooking and food preparation should be conceptualised in cultural and social terms, not just from the viewpoint of malnutrition. Cooking skills may contribute to this sense of food insufficiency by preventing people from fully participating in food culture or following through on healthy eating advice. It should be stressed, however, that the prime determinant of food insufficiency is more likely to be financial want, not the absence of skills (Dowler and Turner with Dobson, 2001).

METHODOLOGY

Formative exploratory qualitative research was conducted with a sample of potential course participants. The sample consisted of three groups (total number of respondents=16) of potential course participants from two communities, Greenock (G 1 & 2) and Alloa (A 1). Greenock is a large port on the Clyde with a population of around 65,000, while Alloa is a small (population 13,000) industrial town in central Scotland. Both areas have unemployment rates above the Scottish average, and score highly on deprivation indices (General Register Office (Scotland), 1994). Participants were recruited through the Blairmore Community Education Centre in Greenock and the Alloa Family Centre, with the assistance of centre

workers, who were asked to identify individuals known to have a potential interest in attending a cooking skills course. All attending were offered a £10 voucher to thank them for participating in the groups.

Focus groups lasted on average 90 minutes, and were moderated by an experienced qualitative researcher. The discussion sequence used in the moderation of the groups covered a range of topics including respondents' experiences of food shopping and preparation, their food preferences, and their feelings about and experiences of cooking. Respondents were asked about their familiarity with specific types of cooking method (eg. boiling, poaching, steaming) and specific dishes (eg. pasta, cheese sauce, soup). To elicit what they would like to see included on a course, respondents were shown a series of showcards listing various aspects of cooking and types of dish, and asked to discuss their feelings about and experiences of each, and also whether they were interested in learning more about them. The showcards were compiled based on discussions with the study team responsible for designing the intervention.

Interviews were taped, transcribed and analysed thematically by one of the researchers (MS) who then made the results available to the other researcher (MC). This acted as a methodological triangulation of the process of analysis.

FINDINGS

The majority of respondents were women, many of whom had children, ranging in age from babies under 12 months to adults in their early twenties; two men also took part in the research, one in each area. Female respondents appeared to have sole or primary responsibility for household cooking and shopping, sometimes for large or extended families. The two men appeared to have most of their meals prepared for them, but claimed to cook on occasions. Around half of the respondents appeared to be unemployed; the rest were in part-time or full-time employment.

Findings are presented under four headings:

- (i) Typology of approaches to cooking
- (ii) Aspects of cooking in which respondents particularly lacked confidence or skills and the experience of cooking.
- (iii) Favourite and regular dishes
- (iv) Response to potential course topics including popular and less popular topics.

Typology of approaches to cooking

Respondents varied in their enthusiasm for, confidence about and claimed ability at cooking. Analysis of individual views led to the identification of three broad approaches to cooking, which are described in more detail below:

- Confident

- Basic but fearful
- ‘Useless’ and ‘hopeless’

Around half the respondents were classified on the basis of their responses to the basic but fearful approach, with the remainder divided fairly evenly between the other two approaches.

Confident

Respondents who appeared to possess what was categorised as a ‘confident’ approach to cooking liked the experience and expressed confidence in their ability to cook a range of dishes. Their repertoire of dishes tended to be wider than that of the other two groups, and they were familiar with a range of cooking techniques, such as poaching and steaming. Nevertheless, they felt in need of advice and encouragement to help them be more adventurous and introduce more variety into their cooking.

‘I’m good at some things but I’d like to be better.’

‘I’m not adventurous.’

(Alloa)

‘I would like to be adventurous in my cooking.’

‘I started buying like a different herb every week, just to try it.’

(Greenock 1)

Basic but Fearful

Respondents who tended to this approach perceived their cooking as basic and in need of improvement. Despite expressing feelings of competence with some aspects of cooking

(‘well, nobody’s got ill or starving so I must be doing something right’), this grouping found cooking a chore and generally lacked confidence. They also felt that their standard repertoire of dishes and techniques was ‘boring’ and ‘unadventurous’. There was a great deal of anxiety about venturing beyond familiar dishes, and reluctance even to experiment on a small scale (for example, by adding slightly different ingredients):

‘Cause you only have to put one different thing in it and it tastes different. But it’s trying it.’

‘See I’d be feared to do that. ‘Cause you could ruin the whole dinner. ‘Cause I know what I like.’

(Greenock 1)

‘Generally speaking we’re like traditionalists I would say. I mean, apart from like spaghetti bolognaise, we wouldn’t have been eating that 20 years ago - we’re, like, not adventurous. We’re used to what we’re used to.’

‘Mince. Stovies [meat and potato dish].’

‘Slice [sausage]. Cabbage.’

(Greenock 1)

Concerns among these respondents were not just with the task of cooking per se but also with the broader planning and organisation of family meals.

‘Useless’ and ‘Hopeless’

Respondents who **were classified in this category** reported lacking many basic cooking skills and felt disempowered by the process, variously describing themselves as ‘useless’, ‘hopeless’ and ‘crap’ at cooking. They described relying heavily on frozen and pre-prepared foods and a microwave, or on others to cook for them; both the men were in this grouping. They found it difficult to identify specific areas for potential improvement, beyond a general wish to be better. The following quotes demonstrate this range of feelings:

‘I just do basic things that come out of a tin and into a pot.’

(Alloa)

‘My daughter doesn’t let me near the kitchen, she says I can’t cook. I mean, I’m 44 years of age and she says I can’t cook. Says I burn everything. I’d like to learn, just to show her, prove that I can.’

(Greenock 2)

‘I’m quite useless at cooking, it’ll be quite an experience for me, because I’d love to be able to cook lots of things from scratch, but I just haven’t attempted it, I’m never, I was never shown how to do it, so it’s just like a box out the freezer.’

(Alloa)

There was uncertainty in this group about even the basic language and concepts of cooking:

‘If you put a steak pie in the oven, is that not roasting it?’

'No, that's not roasting.'

(Greenock 1)

'If I knew how to do it, I would grill fish. I've seen, what'd you call it fish, thingmy, steamed fish - I dunno what it was, but I would like to try that.'

(Greenock 1)

'Boiling, is that just like cooking them in a pot? Yes I do that.'

(Greenock 1)

Age did not seem to be related to any increase in confidence or feelings about cooking, with each of the three groups containing a mix of ages. Older respondents appeared more likely than younger respondents to be able to cook more traditional dishes such as casseroles and roasts; however, they were sometimes less familiar with dishes such as pasta, rice and curry.

In general, both the 'basic' and the 'useless/hopeless' respondents tended to be pessimistic rather than optimistic in their assessments of their cooking ability, and to their skill. For example, several questioned their own knowledge or practice, appealing to the more confident members of the group or the moderator *'is that how you do such and such?'* or *'am I right?'*. Related to this pessimism and uncertainty was a tendency to react defensively (a 'yes, but' response) to arguments from other members of the group that a particular aspect of cooking was not as difficult as others claimed. In the quote below an attempt by one respondent to point out that making a cheese sauce was easy and economical was rebuffed with rationalisations that it was too difficult or didn't taste as good as from a packet:

'You, I showed you how to make a cheese sauce.'

'Yes but I like it better out the packet.'

'And all that mess with the cheese grater.'

'It's cheaper for you.'

'Yes I know, but.'

(Greenock 1)

Aspects of Cooking in Which Respondents Particularly Lacked Confidence, Skills and Experience

A number of sub-categories were identified from analysis of responses, including cooking 'from scratch' or home cooking, a perceived inability to cook properly, and problems following a recipe.

For the least confident group of those who felt 'useless/hopeless' about cooking, the idea of 'cooking from scratch' was daunting. This was defined as cooking which did not rely heavily on convenience foods and which involved some fresh ingredients; for example, stews, cakes, sauces, roast dinners.

'I don't know how to, you know, make up proper meals, you know, it's always things out of boxes, I can't just you know make up a curry, things like that, I'd like to be able to make like more interesting things. I do all sorts of frozen things, but I can't just make up a meal, like from scratch.'

(Alloa)

The terms 'cooking from scratch' and 'home cooking' were used to refer to what were seen as 'proper' methods of cooking. Respondents in the useless/hopeless group relied heavily (sometimes almost solely) on the microwave, and had little experience of using the oven, preparing a dish '*all in a big pot*' [casserole dish or large pan], or techniques such as steaming.

Attempts to cook 'from scratch' which ended in apparent failure (for example, a lumpy cheese sauce, stodgy rice) had the effect not only of reinforcing respondents' poor ratings of their ability but also of encouraging them to turn to convenience and '*easy cook*' products such as packet sauces and boil-in-the-bag rice. Because these products 'worked' more often and did not result in wasted food, many had come to rely on them, despite their being less economical. The anxiety of not knowing whether a dish would turn out properly appeared to play a large part in discouraging respondents from trying new techniques.

'See if I could do it I'd make the time, if I knew I could do it and I knew it was going to work out.'

(Alloa)

Another problematic area was that of following a recipe. Only one **respondent** reported finding it easy to follow a written recipe. The rest described themselves as unable to follow recipes, with some having tried and ‘failed’ and others simply believing that the task would be beyond them.

‘No I don’t follow recipes - I think I’m better watching somebody, and remembering it.’

(Alloa)

For some, the problem appeared to be understanding measurements, while others seemed put off by the need to follow a sequence of instructions, claiming that they ‘got lost’ or confused. The language of recipes was also difficult, with some claiming they ‘hadn’t a clue’ what instructions such as ‘dice’ and ‘sauté’ meant. Several respondents found it difficult even to articulate what they found so difficult about following recipes, other than to say that they ‘just knew they couldn’t’. It is possible that literacy and numeracy problems underpinned some of these apparent difficulties, although it was not possible to explore this in the groups.

Favourite and Regular Dishes

For respondents who tended towards the ‘basic but fearful’ approach to cooking, the repertoire of foods and dishes which they cooked most regularly included:

- Frozen ready meals such as curries and lasagne (usually microwaved).
- Frozen burgers/nuggets/fish fingers (usually grilled or fried).

- Pasta-based meals (eg. tuna and pasta, macaroni cheese, spaghetti bolognese).
- Mince (especially in Greenock where ‘mince ’n totties [potatoes]’ was described as *‘our national dish’*).
- Link and slice sausage (usually fried).
- Potatoes (usually boiled, sometimes roast or as chips).
- Fry-ups (eg. bacon, egg, sausage).
- Chicken-based meals.

Older respondents and those in the more confident group also described occasionally making ‘home cooked’ meals such as casseroles and stews, soups, and roast joints of meat. Younger respondents tended to prefer what were seen by older respondents as less ‘traditional’ dishes, such as curries and pasta. For respondents with young children, their repertoire of dishes was strongly influenced by what they perceived their children would eat, with personal preferences often coming second. The problem of finding a dish which fussy children and other family members would eat reinforced the tendency to stick to a core of basic dishes. The most adventurous respondent, who described reading cookbooks for pleasure, had no children and lived on her own.

Response to Potential Course Topics

Responses to potential course topics were varied. Some potential topics aroused a lot of interest, while others generated an indifferent or negative response (Table 1). Some of the key findings are discussed below.

TAKE IN TABLE 1

Table 1: Response to potential course topics

Popular topics	Moderately popular topics	Unpopular topics
Sauces	Pasta & pasta dishes	Fish
Budget cooking	Rice and rice dishes	Healthy cooking
Soup	Casseroles and stews	Vegetables
	Cakes	Vegetarian cooking
	Cooking for children	

Sauces were a popular topic among all groups. Nearly all respondents liked pasta or macaroni with a cheese sauce; however, many did not know how to make a cheese sauce other than by using a packet mix.

‘No, I just make it out the packet.’

‘I’ve tried to make it like with flour and milk, an’ it goes lumpy.

And I’ve tried to make it with the packet and it still goes lumpy.’

‘I’ve tried it with cornflour, but-’

(Greenock 2)

Some even found packet mixes difficult, sticking instead to the branded products in which pasta and sauce granules are cooked together. Attempts by other respondents to remove some of their perceived difficulties met with a defeated shrug:

'I can't make any kind of sauce at all, I just buy - see I would like to make my own macaroni cheese and that with my own sauce but I just can't do it, I just need to buy it in a box.'

'You could buy a packet of sauce.'

'I've tried that, but I end up putting too much milk in and that.'

'It tells you, half a pint of milk and that-'

'I know, but I just can't do it.'

(Greenock 1)

Budget Cooking was another popular topic and was defined by respondents as that which used everyday ingredients, as opposed to one-off and unfamiliar ingredients, and which avoided pretentious presentation. Here, respondents were interested in learning about how to reduce their reliance on expensive processed and frozen goods by making meals with cheap ingredients:

'Using things that you've got in your house, that's budget cooking. Like everybody's got chips 'n totties [potatoes], so it's got to be something to do with totties and whatever else you've got in the cupboard.'

'Cause it's all the extra things you need, like the spices and that, it all adds up.'

(Greenock 1)

'Nothing dead fancy. Not like on the telly where they've got like one bit of meat and one roast bit and one spoonful of gravy!'

(Greenock 1)

Several expressed difficulty knowing how to 'organise' and to 'plan' a meal in the most efficient and cost-effective way:

'See the other day I was at the supermarket and you know how they got all the cheap things that are on their sell-by date, and I goes to the woman, 'See if I buy that, can I stick it in the freezer?', and she goes, 'Yes, it'll keep for three months'. An' see I didn't know that, if I'd known that I could have been getting all that cheap stuff and sticking it in the freezer, but I didn't know that. I thought once it was on the sell-by date that was it.'

(Greenock 2)

This was an issue that crossed a number of categories and arose on a number of occasions, suggesting that cooking skills covers a broad process, starting with planning for shopping and meal organisation and not just the application of skills in the kitchen.

Soup was another popular topic for the course. Older and more confident respondents who were able to make their own soup were interested in learning new soup recipes, while the less confident respondents said that they had either failed in previous attempts or would not know

how to start. For all groups, recipes had to fall within the range of what was considered ‘ordinary soup’ (eg. with chicken or traditional vegetables) and not to include ingredients which were seen as too exotic or strong tasting for soup.

The basics of cooking *pasta* and *rice* ‘properly’ (ie. without using microwave or frozen versions) were of interest to some of the less confident respondents. More confident respondents expressed an interest in extending their range of pasta and rice-based recipes; however, there was anxiety about dishes which used unfamiliar ingredients.

Younger and less confident respondents were interested in learning how to cook *casseroles and stews*, and also cakes, both of which were seen as daunting examples of ‘proper’ cooking.

‘I’d like to bake cakes and that. Like, properly. ‘Cause I can do it out of a packet and that, but I’d like to know how to do it from scratch, like.’

(Greenock 2)

Cooking for children was an area which aroused some frustration among respondents with younger children. Two main difficulties with cooking for children were identified: finding a dish that fussy or faddy children would eat, and having to cater for children coming in the house at different times rather than at a fixed meal time.

'The two of them, they never eat the same. You've got to make one thing for one, one thing for the other. It'd be great if you could make one thing that could last, that you could stick in the microwave for them at whatever time, that you could feed everybody with.'

(Greenock 2)

One of the most unpopular proposed topics was *fish*. Its unpopularity appeared to stem from two factors: a strong dislike of fish among several respondents, and a deeply-held feeling even among those who did eat fish that it was only acceptable when prepared in [certain predefined](#) ways. This typically meant white fish fillets battered or in breadcrumbs, 'like in the chippie', accompanied by chips or potatoes. Tinned tuna fish in mayonnaise for sandwiches or with pasta was also acceptable, as were frozen fish products such as scampi and fish fingers, although respondents felt that these were not 'real' fish:

'I only eat like fish fingers, and I wouldn't call that fish, that's like kid-on fish, you know.'

(Greenock 1)

There was a strong feeling that it was 'wrong' to cook fish in stews or pies, and the prospect of cooking a whole fish was met with squeamish shudders:

*'Do you not think it's because it's in a pot? You just don't -
fish is like fish and chips, it's not in a pot.'*

'Just doesn't appeal to me like that.'

(Alloa)

*'A whole fish with the head and tail on it, you've got to be
joking.'*

'I wouldn't go near that.'

'I wouldn't know where to start.'

(Greenock 1)

The idea of learning about *'healthy cooking'* on the course produced a mixed response. Some respondents had negative perceptions of healthy cooking, perceiving it as boring, not filling and expensive:

*'I think when people eat that healthy stuff they're always
hungry!'*

'Yes it doesn't fill you up.'

(Greenock 1)

Others were more open to the idea, and perceived that advice on healthy cooking would cover topics such as healthier ways to prepare food and healthier ingredients:

'Well, not using as much fat and sugar in your diet, using more vegetables.'

'Salads, brown bread, you know.'

(Alloa)

There were mixed views about whether 'healthy' cooking was more expensive with some equating it with organic vegetables and 'healthy option' type frozen meals; others suggested that the ingredients were not necessarily more dear and could even be cheaper. Overall, the mixed responses to healthy cooking as a topic suggested that this should be addressed in a low key way on the Cookwell course, and that explicit labelling of the intervention as a 'health' course should be avoided.

The idea of learning more on the course about cooking *vegetables* was largely received with indifference, as was the topic *vegetarian meals*. A few expressed a tentative interest in trying a vegetarian dish such as pasta, for the novelty value, but thought it unlikely it could become a staple part of their diet.

'I would try it, but we'd always like have something with it.'

(Alloa)

A few other topics generated a small amount of interest among some respondents. These were: food labelling, food hygiene and safety, buying cuts of meat, and microwave cooking.

DISCUSSION

With the changes in eating habits over the last twenty years, it can be argued that traditional cooking skills – i.e. taking raw ingredients and turning them into complete culturally appropriate dishes - may be becoming redundant (Mintz, 1996). In **this** research, the younger members of the focus groups saw cooking as a chore which clashed with other aspects of their lives. Social trends suggest a move from cooking in the home with basic ingredients to a situation where we rely on the labour of others with ready-prepared foods (Lupton, 1996; Ritzer, 1993 & 2000). Fieldhouse (1995) has argued *‘if prepared food is so easily accessible, why bother to learn to cook? If you haven’t acquired cooking skills, then fast foods are the most efficient answer’*. Lang and Caraher (2001) argued that cooking skills as defined by experts may be in decline but that this hides a more complex picture in which cooking along with lifestyles are being re-structured and fragmented. Cooking skills are being adapted and changed in response to external variables such as time demands, commercial developments, food availability and technology.

However, the continuing emphasis on cooking as a skill that should produce food that is aesthetically pleasing, tasty and acceptable to different members of the household/family puts pressure on those responsible for cooking in the home (McIntosh and Zey, 1989). The findings above support this by showing that the use of pre-prepared foods is balanced with the demands of everyday living **and making things easy**. The repertoire of dishes cooked most regularly included frozen ready meals and frozen burgers/nuggets/fish fingers along with pasta-based meals, and involved a combination of budgeting, buying, planning and meal assembly skills, suggesting that it is erroneous to define these respondents as unskilled. Yet the respondents’ replies display a tension over the concept of ‘proper foods’

and ‘proper cooking’, with many reporting disquiet over serving processed and ready prepared meals. This is akin to Douglas (1972) and Murcott’s (1982, 1986 and 1995) findings re ‘proper’ food and meals (meat and two vegetables) [and the ‘meal occasion’](#). The respondents here focused on home cooking as a goal, displaying some vestiges of the notion of ‘real food’ and its preparation from raw ingredients. Furthermore, for the majority ‘proper cooking’ was that which occurred in the home. Yet there was a feeling that this might not be as appetising or as attractive as food consumed when eating out, or might be inferior to processed goods. Standards for home cooking are increasingly being influenced by convenience foods: the groups identified that sauces should be like ones that come from the packet, and that fish should resemble that from the take-away or from the supermarket freezer. This emphasises that the standard for food has shifted from the domestic to the industrial (Schlosser, 2001), with commercial criteria becoming the new norm (Caraher, Lang and Dixon, 2000).

Other research (Lang et al, 1999; Caraher et al, 1999) has found that ability and confidence in relation to cooking, and to cooking specific ingredients, are age-related. In our research, older respondents were more confident about traditional dishes such as stews and soups, while the younger group expressed more interest, if not confidence, in learning about pasta and rice.

The range of skills and experiences found in this research - from confidence to feelings of real disempowerment in the kitchen – underlines the need for cooking interventions to be able to address widely varying needs within the one course. Interventions need to address not only differing levels of skills but also different learning styles. In this research, the use of recipes as a means of learning to cook was problematic for some, perhaps as a result of low

confidence combined with literacy/numeracy difficulties and the lack of basic kitchen equipment. Other research has confirmed that recipes and cookbooks are most useful to those in higher socio-economic groups (Lang et al, 1999). The implication for cooking skills interventions is that they need to deploy a range of teaching methods, balancing the need for some to 'learn by doing' with information for those who prefer a more abstract approach to learning.

Simple solutions for those identified as possessing 'basic' skills and those feeling 'useless' need to be approached with caution, as the provision of skills may on its own provide an inadequate response. The reported lack of confidence may not be related only to cooking skills but also to attitudes towards a particular food or behaviour, such as cooking fish. Personal preferences to do with a particular food's taste and texture may be more important than ability to cook it in determining if people in the first instance buy or prepare that food (Conner et al, 1998).

McIntosh and Zey (1989) highlight the difference between 'responsibility' and 'control' of food preparation/cooking; namely, that while women were responsible for family meals, they were often not in control of the eating preferences habits of the family/household. Analysis of the data here indicate a similar distinction between 'responsibility for' and 'control of' cooking food. For example, family or household dislike of some sorts of food were often given by respondents as reasons why they would not buy or cook a particular dish, although this reluctance to take risks on behalf of the family was sometimes presented as personal food preferences. This can be seen with the issue of fish and its cooking: the 'fact' that the family or children would not eat it was seen as the important issue, showing that teaching people to

prepare food in a classroom setting may not be sufficient to overcome barriers to the eating of certain foods, as the cook is not the one who ultimately controls the family eating habits.

In addition the preparation and smells associated with certain foods, such as fish, may also be important deterrents in a small house with few facilities such as an extractor fan or separate rooms for living and eating. As Anderson et al (1998) reported in the evaluation of an education intervention to increase fruit and vegetables among adults in a community setting, the support of family and friends, food costs, time constraints and shopping practicalities were all barriers to healthy eating and greater consumption of vegetables. In other words, the deciding factor in food choice may be related more to family preferences and practical and environmental constraints than to the ability to cook a particular food. This raises a wider public health issue, one that classes on cooking can only partially address. Public health interventions, in order to be successful, need to address practical barriers such as the limited availability of fruit and vegetables in certain geographical areas and to acknowledge likes and dislikes of family or household members.

Advice advocated by health agencies promotes consumption of food such as pasta, rice, green vegetables and oily fish - the same foods that our participants identified as the ones they were less or least interested in learning how to cook. Similarly, interest in learning more about 'healthy eating' among those interviewed was minimal. This raises issues of how to address these issues within an intervention, and the need to develop innovative ways of including them in the diet. Just as the best way to increase fruit intake is to locate its consumption within everyday norms, such as taking fruit juice as part of breakfast or eating fruit at the end of a meal, there is a need to do something similar with the above list of foods. Teaching

people to cook vegetables as part of a '*proper meal*' may have more resonance with participants on a cooking class/intervention than having a separate session on cooking vegetables. Healthy food preparation skills need to be built in a way which engages with participants' everyday lives. Budget cooking and the use of everyday ingredients and materials that are in the cupboard were identified as important to respondents, and provide an indirect way in to the concept of healthy cooking.

The Cookwell programme was therefore designed to be a standardised but flexible programme in each community. There was an emphasis on using basic foods - pasta, rice, potatoes - in simple but innovative ways to achieve dietary balance; variety was introduced through the addition of herbs and spices and through ethnic recipes where participants were interested in these. Advice on budget and healthy cooking was introduced 'naturalistically' rather than as a topic in its own right: for example, while preparing spaghetti bolognese, participants would be encouraged to talk about the different kinds of mince they could buy and how to reduce the fat content by using leaner cuts of meat, draining fat from browned mince and incorporating vegetables in mince dishes. It was decided that fish should be included in the programme despite respondents' ambivalence; however, it was included alongside more popular topics rather than in a session of its own (for example, a session on rice and pasta included two fish-based recipes, kedgeree and tuna bake). All recipes were tested and revised accordingly, and sensory evaluation of dishes was conducted, before finalising the recipe book. This also included attractive colour photographs of finished dishes. To help build participants' confidence, all groups were kept small in number and the sessions were run in familiar surroundings (a family or community centre), often by a local facilitator.

The women in this research, despite their misgivings concerning their lack of confidence and ability, were providing family meals and demonstrating complex skills in the area of food provision and management. Many, for example, had to juggle low incomes, part time work, child care, lone parenthood and infrequent and expensive public transport in order to shop and cook. In the context of difficult, busy, complicated and unsupported lives, there is a need to recognise that ‘cooking’ embraces a whole range of skills in order to feed families and get food on the table.

In conclusion, it is important not to expect cooking projects on their own to tackle what are bigger cultural [and structural](#) problems connected with the promotion of healthy eating, and to acknowledge that cooking skills are but one link in the healthy eating jigsaw. Nevertheless, the study illustrates how a relatively small exploratory research exercise can provide valuable insights into cooking-related needs, and can be used to help shape interventions which are sensitive and responsive to those needs.

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