Gender and Children’s Food Practices: A Qualitative Study of 12-14-year-old Children in a Danish School Setting

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ARTICLE

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ABSTRACT

In this article, we will focus on gender and food among children in Danish home economics classes—more specifically, children aged 12–14 (6th and 7th graders in the Danish school). The aim of the study is to investigate whether the traditional gender representations found in studies of children’s food media are replicated in children’s food practices in a school setting. The article concludes that gender is not as manifest as other studies have indicated, notably those on media representations of children and food. This is not to say that gender distinctions were absent but that they were expressed in more subtle ways. Also, the article highlights the importance of paying attention to different kinds of food practices, and how they might be gendered differently by the same subjects. The article calls for more research in the field and more broadly on the complex relationship between gendered media representation and social practices in everyday life.

Over the last decades, the gendering of food practices has been the object of many studies. The majority of these studies have highlighted that food practices reproduce gendered hierarchies (Hollows, 2016; Julier & Lindenfeld, 2005; Murcott, 1983; Strange, 1999; Swinbank, 2002). More recently, however, and particularly in a Nordic context, it has been argued that men are increasingly participating in the chores of everyday domestic cooking (Holm, Ekström, Hach, & Lund, 2015). This could be read as an indication that cooking has become a platform for change in relation to
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Keywords: Food and Gender, Children, Cooking, Home Economics, School, gender and media
Over the last decades, the gendering of food practices has been the object of many studies. The majority of these studies have highlighted that food practices reproduce gendered hierarchies (Murcott, 1983; Strange, 1998; Swinbank, 2002; Julier and Lindenfield, 2006; Hollows, 2016). More recently, however, and particularly in a Nordic context, it has been argued that men are increasingly participating in the chores of everyday domestic cooking (Holm et al., 2016). This could be read as an indication that cooking has become a platform for change in relation to everyday equality in heterosexual couples and for mainstreaming new ideals of masculinities (Arseth and Olsen, 2008; Neuman, 2016).

In these debates about the gendering of food practices, the importance of gender in relation to children’s food practices is often overlooked. The few studies on the topic nonetheless suggest that traditional understandings of gender heavily influence children’s relation to food (Inness, 2000; Krogager, 2012; Fakazis, 2017). A series of recent studies of Danish children’s cookbooks underline how this genre is dominated by traditional understandings of gender. In extreme examples, boys are portrayed as active and adventurous, often portrayed out in nature cooking over a campfire, whereas girls are represented as cupcake-eating princesses in a pinkish universe (Leer 2015; Nyvang and Leer, 2019).

In this article, we will similarly focus on gender and food among children in a Danish context. More specifically, the empirical context is experimental field work in home economics classes, conducted in three different Danish schools. The research centered on children between the ages of 12 and 14 (6th and 7th graders in the Danish school). The aim of the study was to investigate whether the traditional gender representations found in studies of children’s food media are replicated in children’s food practices in a school setting. On the basis of this analysis, we call in the conclusion for more nuanced discussion of the relationship between media, gender and children’s everyday practices in contemporary, digitalized culture. Also, we argue that innovative research designs including digital media might offer interesting ways to develop this discussion and give voice to children.

Theoretically, the article is informed by a poststructural perspective on gender that considers ‘doing food’ and ‘doing gender’ as two mutually constituting processes (Leer, 2016) and is inspired by the British cultural studies tradition of analyzing gender performance as contextual negotiations of cultural repertoires of discourse and practices (Gill, 2003). The analytical focus is on how cooking
functions to maintain gendered boundaries between boys and girls, but also on how food practices can disrupt the traditional gendering of food practices (Szabo, 2014; Neuman, 2016; Meah, 2017).

Gender and Food Practices

Several feminist studies of food practices underline that cooking most often upholds gendered distinctions and hierarchies between men and women in everyday life – also in modern societies (Lupton, 1996; Devault, 1991; Swinbank, 2000; Counihan, 1999). Szabo (2014) describes a long-standing dichotomization between “traditional culinary masculinities and feminities”, drawing on the now rich literature on food and gender. Here, traditional culinary femininities are constructed around the ideal of the housewife and mother providing care and love for others through food. For women, cooking is thus defined by logics of functionality, health and everyday care. These norms are not constitutive elements of the traditional culinary masculinities. Men’s cooking is more hobby-oriented and could be seen as care-for-self-projects (Lupton 1996). Furthermore men’scookings is often oriented towards special occasions (Adler, 1981) and associated with completion and hierarchal mindsets (Nilsson 2012). By using the plural femininities and masculinities, Szabo also accentuates that these repertoires should be understood as dynamic constructions, rather than static and universal models. These models are rearticulated in different ways in different contexts.

These traditional models are tested as men increasingly take responsibility for home cooking. The tendency is particular strong in the Nordic countries (Holm et al., 2016). These dynamics could make a case for the kitchen as a space where a feminist agenda is integrated into everyday life (Aarseth and Olsen, 2008; Neuman, Gottzén and Fjellström, 2016). Other studies highlight that gendered norms around cooking might be changing, but they also involve the development of new kinds of gendered hierarchies, notably in the intersection between class and gender (Hollows, 2016; Leer, 2017).

Distinct terms have been used to describe food-related activities. Devault talks about the work of feeding the family, which is a much broader concept than mere cooking. It encompasses a range of practices: listing, provisioning, cooking, cleaning up, etc. This allows Devault to highlight all the ‘invisible’ work presented in her data set typically performed by women. The concept of food work also describes food activities in everyday life (Neuman, 2017; Meah, 2014).

Other studies have focused on the gendered aspects of eating. Sociologist Alan Warde has presented one of the most elaborated theories on the study of eating (2016). It is based on
practice theory and has a more general scope than that of gender; nevertheless, gender is a recurrent theme, notably in interplay with class. Also, a series of studies has noted the significance of gender in relation to eating, particularly regarding women’s identity anxieties related to weight (Bordo, 1993).

**A Model for Analyzing Gender Across Food Practices**

When analyzing food and gender, a distinction is necessary between different types of practice in relation to food. Distinguishing between types of practices in relation to food, makes possible a critical perspective on men’s increased participation in home cooking as underlined by Devault. If men are ‘just’ doing the cooking, their contribution to the domestic work might be very ‘visible’, but if women are still handling the planning, shopping, cleaning, etc., the contribution might be relatively small.

In this article, we wanted to maintain this larger perspective presented by Devault. However, we wanted to go beyond the mere production of food and also analyze eating practices. Eating is a central part of the home economics classes, and we wanted to describe the gendering of all food-related practices. The concepts of ‘feeding the family’ or ‘food work’ do not appear to include eating, so we will use the term ‘food practices’ to describe all the food-related practices in the study. We have chosen to distinguish between four types of food practices to sharpen our analytical gaze.

**Figure 1: Different Kinds of Food Practice**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Organization</th>
<th>Cooking</th>
<th>Eating</th>
<th>Cleaning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Deciding on menu</td>
<td>Food preparation</td>
<td>The eating sequence</td>
<td>Dish washing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Listing, Shopping ...</td>
<td>Social interaction during</td>
<td>Clean-up measures</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>...</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>
The four categories are chronologically and logically dependent. One has to cook before eating; one has to organize before cooking, and cleaning is always the final element. However, these practices should not be viewed as completely separate, but rather as interwoven and dynamically overlapping. In fact, several of our analytical points concern situations where the boundaries between the categories are negotiated, for instance when a boy eats from a plate before everyone has sat down around the table and the communal eating part of class ‘officially’ begins. This informal act of eating is condemned by several girls. Also, we were interested in examining whether the distinct food practices were gendered in different ways and trying to apprehend the logics behind these variations. So, rather than analyzing one practice across a series of contexts, as exemplified in Warde’s analysis of eating (2016), our ambition was to analyze a variety of practices related to food, and the way these were gendered in one particular situation: the home economics classes in Danish schools.

**Gendering of Children’s Food Practices**

In the relatively limited literature on food, children and gender, the significance of gender is striking. The significance it especially notably in studies conducted on food media for children (Inness, 2000; Nyvang, 2016; Nyvang and Leer, 2019). Traditionally, children’s cooking was synonymous with girls’ cooking and closely connected to becoming a woman and embracing ideas of accomplishing womanhood c.f. the traditional culinary femininities described by Szabo.

In an examination of American cookbooks for children from 1910-1960, Inness illustrates this point by quoting the *The Betty Betz Teen-age Cookbook* from 1953: “If a girl is reasonably attractive and a good cook as well, she has better odds for marriage than her playgirl friend who boasts that she ‘can’t even boil water’” (quoted in Inness, 2000, p. 119). In studies of more recent development in children’s cookbooks in a Danish context, Nyvang and Leer describe the inclusion of boys in the genre from the 1960s, but also highlight how gender distinctions persist even after the 2000s (Leer, 2015; Nyvang, 2017; Nyvang and Leer, 2019).

Fakazis (2017) describes how foodie culture\(^1\) is also opening up for boys and girls. It has been stressed that foodie kids are valuable accessories for urban middle class parents (Johnston and

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1 The term foodie is often attributed to *The Official Foodie Handbook* by Paul Levy and Ann Bar. They famously define a foodie as a person who is “very, very, very interested in food”, but the term also seems to designate a more modern and globalized culinary identity than the French centered gourmet or epicure described in *La physiologie du goût* (1825) by Jean A. Brillat-Savarin. Concerning the concept foodie and foodie culture, see Johnston and Baumann (2010).
Bauman, 2010). With this ‘foodification’ of children’s food practices, Fakazis argues that we need to pay attention to how culinary socialization also reproduces gendered ambivalences from adult foodie culture. Women have more difficulties than men in gaining access to the foodie culture. Women need to balance their interest in gastronomy with the gendered expectations of care work, slimness and healthiness (Cairns et al., 2010; Cairns and Johnston, 2015). Men, on the other hand, find it quite unproblematic to combine the foodie identity with cultural norms for masculinity. Fakazis (2017) argues that gendered norms are also imposed on children in children’s food culture by the many commercial and political agents.

Krogager (2012) focuses on how children use food and media in everyday practices. Krogager has developed an experimental design, inviting children to a session of snacking and creative media production. During this session, she observes and interviews the children. Krogager demonstrates how gender structures the children’s relation to food. Roughly speaking, the boys define meat as a central element in their relation to food. Craving for meat becomes a central component to being a real boy and a legitimate member of the boys’ social life. The girls, on the other hand, expose a shared liking for fruit and embrace the connotations of freshness associated with fruit.

It is striking in this literature how gendered norms assign distinct culinary identities to boys and girls. These resonate the traditional culinary femininities and masculinities defined by Szabo. In this study, we will focus on children’s everyday food practices, inspired by Krogager (2012). We want to question whether the traditional gender roles found in the studies of media representation of children’s food practices are also found in Danish children’s food practices in a school setting. Like Krogager (2012), we have worked with an experimental design involving media co-production. Unlike Krogager (2012), our design has a strong focus on food practices more generally. Krogager focused mainly on consumption (snacking), whereas we also wanted to investigate children’s cooking and the other food practices outlined in figure 1. The reason for choosing this broader analytical focus is to analyze whether the gendering differs according to the type of food practice.

**Methodological Design**

The article is part of a larger study on Danish children’s food and media practices. This study involved four researchers from different academic fields (Anthropology, Media Studies and Cultural Studies).
The four researchers had distinct foci and interests in the study: new methodological design, children’s cooking skills, children’s media use and gender.²

Our aim was to create a design that supplemented the traditional methods (such as interview and observation). Much research has shown that in relation to food and media practices, ‘sayings’ (what we say) and ‘doings’ (what we do) are engaged in complicated relations (Leer and Povlsen, 2016; Krogager, 2012). Hence, our ambition was to create settings in which the children ‘said’ and ‘did’ and collectively negotiated the underlying norms. To achieve this, we set out to develop the methodological conclusions from (Krogager, 2012), namely that creative co-productive settings could provide a rich supplement to traditional methods like observation and interview and help us understand the negotiations of gender among children.

On a practical level, the field work took place in three different home economics classes in the 6th and the 7th grade (12-14-year-olds). The large majority of the students had reasonably good cooking skills and seemed comfortable while cooking. This reflects the general level of Danish children where all children have home economics. Our first encounter with the students/participants was an introductory visit in the class where we had a brief discussion about food videos on YouTube. The purpose was to meet the participants, create a bond with them, and introduce them to the coming venture.³

The venture itself took place about a week later. We met with the class and the teacher in the morning and spent the day from 8 AM until 3 PM together. We were in charge of the activities. The participants were split in random and gender mixed groups of four to five people. Each group received a bag of groceries. Alongside the groceries was a note that read either ‘starter’, ‘main course’ or ‘dessert’, and each group had an iPad. The groups had two hours to cook a creative dish with the groceries they were given. They were also asked to film the cooking process to make a food video later the same day. After the two hours, the groups presented and served their dish for a panel of adult judges recruited from the school staff. An award was given to the most tasteful dish. In the

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² For a more comprehensive description on the method, the methodology and reflections on the advantages and drawbacks on this kind of research, see Krogager et al. (in press).

³ In relation to ethical considerations on researching on/with children we followed the guidelines presented in Kampmann (2003). We had obtained consent from all parents through the schools and distributed a description of the project. The parents were given the option of saying “no” on behalf of their children. All names are changed, and all persons and institutions are anonymized. See also Povlsen, et al. (forthcoming) for expanded reflections on the ethical considerations of doing this kind of research.
afternoon, the groups edited their recordings of the cooking process into a food video, using the programme iMovie, and uploaded it to YouTube. Afterwards, the groups presented and showed their video to the rest of the participants, and the groups voted for the best video. The team behind the most popular video also received a small prize.4

We repeated the field work three times in different schools across Denmark, one rural, one suburban and one private school. Each class consisted of between 15-20 children. A total of 27 girls and 26 boys participated in the study. The differences in the schools in relation to socio-economics, class, digital literacy and geography will be discussed in another paper, and there was no clear link between for instance class and the gender negotiations. The organization of the class (in relation to for instance eating) seemed important to how gender was negotiated (more on this later).

In order to avoid unnecessary obfuscation, we will not go into deeper intersectional analysis in this paper. The teacher was present during the field work, but we encouraged the teacher to step back and not interfere in the children’s group work.5

The ventures generated a rich data set. For each day of field work, the four researchers gathered hundreds of photographs and videos, field notes based on observations and small ad hoc interviews, the dishes cooked by the children, and the food videos produced by the children. The interactive use of media and tablets in the study design allowed us to get a range of perspectives and noticeably also the children’s perspective on various situation. This way of including media enable the children to become co-creators of data, rather than merely objects of study. Like most Danish children, the children in the study were skilled media users and used to have tablet and other medias as a part of their school day. They engaged eagerly in filming and photographing their cooking practices.

For this article, the data set was analysed with a focus on gendering of the food practices. The analysis was deductive and took the theoretical starting points from the literature on the gendering of food presented in the first part of this article. Through repeated reviewing of the data set, we focused on a) how gender was at play in the different food practices and the similarities and differences between the distinct food practices and (cf. figure 1) b) examples where the

4 We were rather ambivalent about creating a competitive setting, but it worked well in engaging the children (see Krogager et al. 2019).
5 This was not always the case see Povlsen et al (2020). This paper also discuss differences in the schools and the children in term of socio-economics, geography and digital skills.
traditional culinary gender identities were followed and transgressed (cf. Szabo’s traditional culinary feminities and masculinities) c) how the space of the school class was gendered since space appear to be central to these culinary gender identities. This process was a combination of collective and individual readings. First, all researcher individually looked at the material with the three categories mentioned above. Next, findings were collectively discussed and key examples were chosen and discussed more in depth, also collectively. Finally, based on our readings and our key examples, we set out to determine the underlying patterns and logics behind these.

In the work process of the analysis, we quickly realized that the gender patterns were much less explicit in our material than in food media texts like children’s cookbooks. Much of the time, gender seemed of little importance in the children’s cooking, while it was more apparent in other practices. Upon closer inspection, we found a number of situations where gender seemed to be at play, although in more subtle ways than in the studies of children’s cookbooks and in Krogager, 2012. In the presentation of our analysis, we will start by addressing the apparent absence of gender. Subsequently, we will discuss how order and transgression appeared to be gendered in the home economics classes and the kitchen space. Finally, we will discuss how gender played a more significant role in the eating sequences than the cooking sequences.

**Analysis: the subtle gender distinctions**

*The absence and presence of gender during cooking*

The predominant impression from our analysis of gender in the school kitchen was that gender did not play as decisive a role as expected in light of existing literature. Boys and girls performed the same tasks in relation to cooking. They did not appear bound by the norms of traditionally ‘feminine’ or ‘masculine’ approaches to cooking (Szabo, 2014). For instance, the girls handled meat with the same interest and ease as the boys. Also, we saw various examples of boys demonstrating great dedication to decorating cakes with pink icing. It was not an issue for the boys to work with icing of a ‘girlish’ colour. Other boys voluntarily set the table and folded napkins – which has also been seen as a traditionally ‘feminine’ task, related to the ideal of the woman as housekeeper and house decorator (Hollows, 2007; Szabo and Koch, 2017).

The children worked in groups. These were randomly constructed and always gender mixed (3-5 per group). In the absolute majority of cases, boys and girls collaborated very well and
democratically in the groups. However, there were a few cases, and one in particular, where a clear division between boys and girls was apparent. This group consisted of three boys and two girls. The collaboration during cooking became an issue and created a conflict that polarized the boys and the girls. The group was assigned the main dish with minced meat and vegetables. Initially, one of the girls took control and made a plan for what the group should cook and who should do what. The boys did not stick with the plan and conspired to improvise, which led to a quite different dish than initially planned. The hamburgers were boiled in cream instead of being fried (which was the original plan). The boys joked about their own mistake while the ‘girl leader’ became furious. After this incidence, the boys and the girls in the group did not collaborate but worked at a distance from each other in a tense atmosphere. In this example, a struggle over who was in power led to a clear gendered division in the group, provoked by the boys’ rebellion against the self-elected girl leader.

In the other groups, boys and girls collaborated with great success and seemed to enjoy the creative task, jointly discussing and negotiating solutions as well as the division of labour in a democratic manner. So, in the absolute majority of the cases, cooking appeared to unite boys and girls, rather than reinforcing and replicating gendered distinctions and hierarchies. Cooking worked to create bonds across genders. However, the example of the boys’ mutiny also works to highlight that cooking has a latent potential for gendered conflicts and negotiations of power relations among boys and girls as highlighted in much of the literature on men and women’s cooking practices.

Order and transgression in the kitchen space

The above example of the boys’ improvisation with the hamburger recipe is also an example of one of the most notable ways in which the cooking practices of the boys and the girls differed. In general, the girls were more likely to assume the role as the preserver of order, while the boys were more likely to demonstrate transgressive behavior. The boys who boiled the hamburgers did not stick to the plan but insubordinately deviated from it. In this example, a girl imposed order by taking charge of the collaboration, whereas the boys deliberately worked against this structure.

We identified different ways in which the girls were connected to order. Here a citation from our field notes:

The boy, Elias, is carrying the finished and attentively decorated lagkage (layered sponge cake with whipped cream) to the fridge. The fridge is situated at the other end of the large room in which the home economics classes take place. The two other boys in the group of four are volunteering to help him although Elias could easily do it alone. The fourth and final member of the group, the girl, Signe, who
participated equally and to mutual satisfaction with the boys during the making of the cake, is left alone at the sink doing the dishes. The boys are taking their time, stopping several times to show the cake, which they are very proud of, to the other groups. One of the members of the research team notices them and takes a photo. The boys voluntarily, almost eagerly, pose for the camera and encourage more photos. During this detour of several minutes, Signe works alone at the sink.

This example illustrates how girls in our empirical material often had the primary responsibility for washing up and maintaining order and tidiness at the cooking stations. The boys, on the other hand, were more likely to break out of the space which the group was given during class.

The example mimics the traditional division between women as bound to the home and responsible for the domestic sphere, and men living and working in the public sphere (Hollows, 2008). This dichotomy is often reproduced in Western food culture and food media (Swenson, 2009). In the layer cake example, the home is not a house but the work station, and the public sphere is the rest of the classroom. The boys leave ‘home’ to show their work to the ‘public space’. In this process, they engage with the others in this communal space by showing off, discussing with classmates and posing for the camera and are rewarded with positive reactions. But the boys also leave Signe at ‘home’ where she is doing the less glamorous work of washing up, which is not applauded in any way.

Signe was part of the work on the cake and collaborated equally with the boys during the cooking process. Subsequently, however, she is cut off from the group and does not profit from the affirmative attention the boys receive. It is also noticeable that this unequal division of labor is not articulated at any point by Signe or the boys.

This instance does not paint a correct picture of the general division of labor or space among boys and girls in the data. As a general rule, the boys also participated in the washing up. The girls were not bound to the sink. They also left the work station to talk to friends or look at what the other groups were doing. However, despite being an extreme case, the example highlights that the girls were more often left with primary responsibility for the properness of the working station, and this was tacitly accepted by both boys and girls – and teachers. In one of the video clips from a moment when an entire class is washing up, we see that in all the four groups, a girl is doing the actual hard work of the washing up at the sink, while all the other girls are drying dishes. Some of boys also help to dry dishes, but not all of them. Some boys are on Ipads, some are chatting, and some are consciously avoiding the work space. Whereas the boys do participate in the more boring
parts of the food practices, the girls appear much more responsible for maintaining order and properness.

If order and properness appear more easily associated with the girls, transgressive behavior more frequently characterizes the behavior of the boys. We saw this in the example with the boys cooking the hamburger, but it occurs multiple times in the data set. In one of the videos, a group of children is standing in front of the finished dishes. These are placed on a rolling table, waiting to be presented for the jury. The girls are discussing the differences in the visual quality of the main course (minced meat with fried, crisp potatoes) and the dessert (a raspberry mousse decorated with chocolate). A boy is not participating in the discussion, but is instead looking at the plates while playing with some knifes. After a while, he passes closely by a plate, snatches one of the crispy potatoes from a dish and eats it. Although he tries to be discreet, the girls immediately notice the gesture. One of them corrects him in a judgmental tone: “You don’t grab anything from the finished plate!”

In this example, the girls admire and respectfully discuss the plates while the boy sees an opportunity to satisfy his craving. His theft appears as a transgressive move. The boy does not respect the work of his classmates and puts his individual need above the consideration for their work. Once more, the girls are responsible for maintaining order and taking responsibility for this orderliness, while the boys enjoy greater liberty to transgress the collective norms and spatial boundaries.

**Cooking vs Eating**

As mentioned, the food practices in the gender mixed groups were generally performed in a democratic and inclusive way in all three schools. There were, however, different norms for eating together at the three schools. The differences in meal structure resulted in different gender dynamics during the meal situations. In one school, it was customary for the groups to eat together at separate group-sized tables. Hereby, the inclusive atmosphere of the cooking activities continued in the gender mixed groups. In another school, we noticed a significant rupture between how gender was at play in the cooking and the eating sequence. In this school, the entire class ate together at a long table. This could be seen as an ambition to unite the class in a communal moment. However, it had the opposite effect. Here a quote from the field notes:

As the groups finish their work at their stations and wait for the last groups to finish as well, the children start to sit down at the huge dinner table. It is carefully prepared by a group of boys with folded napkins,
plates and cutlery. A group of four boys from different groups sits down at one end of the table. They start telling jokes, removing the napkins from their glasses and drinking water from the glasses. Their laughter and vivid gestures fill this end of the table. A group of girls arrive at the table and, after looking at the boys’ end, decide to sit down at the opposite end of the table, farthest from the boys. The girls sit down. They start to talk discreetly, waiting for everybody to arrive, before removing the napkins from their glasses and starting to drink. As the final groups arrive, the girls join the girls’ end of the table end the boys the other end. Only two boys arrive ‘too late’ and get a seat with the girls.

We have several photos of this episode. In these, the segregation of boys and girls is striking. This segregation is also in stark contrast to the way boys and girls worked together (and had fun together) while cooking the food they are now about to eat. Additionally, the atmosphere in the boys’ end and the girls’ end is remarkably different. The gang of boys is loud, joking and ‘mark’ their territory by removing the napkins and drinking the water. The girls’ end is quieter, and they do not mark the place, but wait for everyone to be seated before touching anything. In this example, cooking and eating demonstrated distinct patterns in the relation between boys and girls in the class.

Andersen et al. (2017) also noted differences between cooking and eating in a school setting. This study did not involve gender, but more generally the pedagogical and normative aspects of cooking and eating. Andersen et al. (2017) describes how a group of children are given a liberated and fun experience when invited to improvise while cooking in a school kitchen. When the moment to eat the food arrives in another room, the atmosphere changes and the adults took a more normative and authoritative position. The adults no longer encourage agency and creativity from the children, but rather want the children to eat ‘properly’ and respect the many table manner rules imposed.

In the situation described above, a similar change in children’s use of food to perform gender takes place when the children transition from cooking to eating. In the cooking process, the boys and girls collaborate, and cooking becomes a way of bonding. Gender is not very visible. However, when the children eat, gender becomes very present, both in the spatial distribution of the boys and the girls and also in the behavior of the girls and the boys. So, whereas the practice of cooking encourages a kind of bonding between boys and girls, the moment of eating separates them.

Why is that? One possible explanation could be the norms associated with cooking and eating. As Andersen et al. (2017) highlights, the teacher’s expectations for the behavior of the children differ when the children are cooking compared to when they eat. The act of eating is in
schools, problematic and talked about with strong normative undertones, as is also the case in society in general.

Another aspect could be that eating is a more intimate act than cooking and best performed among peers of the same gender. Højlund (2018) has carried out ethnographic studies with Danish children of the same age over an extended period of time. In this study, Højlund identifies various strategies through which children’s taste is rendered a collective experience and a mark of group identity. Often, the experience of tasting unifies groups consisting of members of the same gender and thus functions as a driver for homosociality.\(^6\) In one of the empirical examples from Højlund (2018) a girl wants to share the taste of her favorite tea with others, she asks two girls from her class to join her although boys are also present. The sharing of a favorite tea is a way of underlining intimacy with same gender peers and appears too intimate an experience to share with the boys. In another example, three boys cook crisps together during a class of home economics. One of the boys tastes the crisps and proclaims loudly: “Listen! We made these potatoes crispy.” Here, eating and sharing a taste experience work to affirm the bond in his group of boys.

**Discussion:**

Overall, the analysis of our material suggests that the gender differences in cooking in a school setting are not as pronounced or as traditional as described in much of the existing literature on gender and food among children, notably analyses of media texts. This does not mean that gender is absent, but that it is expressed in subtler and less categorical ways. To understand the way gender is at play when children ‘do’ food, our analysis suggests that it is important to differentiate between different types of food practices (c.f. figure 1) because the degree to which traditional gender is manifest varies in the different kinds of practice. Referring to figure 1, our analysis can be summarized in the following points:

1) **Organization:** boys and girls generally worked well together and organized their communal work in a democratic manner. However, the girls worked in a more orderly fashion whereas the boys had more room for improvisation, and they were more at liberty to improvise.

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\(^6\) Homosociality designates a sociality with persons of the same sex and in relation to food studied ingastronomic restaurants (Neuman and Fjellström, 2014), among American-Italian men (Naccarato, 2012) and in food television (Leer, 2016b).
2) Cooking: gender differences were least noticeable in this activity. Boys and girls performed the same tasks, and the gender mixed groups appeared open to creative collaboration and bonding between boys and girls.

3) Eating: around the table and during food consumption situations, the gendered differences became more apparent. Boys and girls had a tendency to seek homosocial groups while eating. Also, the boys seemed more eager to satisfy their appetite. The girls seemed to restrain themselves much more than the boys, and they put the collective rules before their individual appetite.

4) Cleaning: both girls and boys participated in cleaning up, but as our examples illustrated, the girls took or were given much greater responsibility for these tasks, and this was tacitly accepted by all actors.

If we read this in relation to the existing literature on gendering of children’s food practices, we notice several points. Firstly, our study stands out as it provides examples of how long-standing gendered stereotypes of Western food culture (e.g. Szabo’s distinction) were not dominant characteristics of Danish children’s actual cooking in a school setting. Secondly, we found examples of food practices where gender seemed to be more important. These were notably in relation to food consumption and in clean-up situations. Here, the girls appeared more bound by norms for correct behavior and maintaining order than the boys, who could engage more freely with such norms. This leads us to the third insight of the paper, namely that it is crucial to distinguish between different kinds of food practice when analyzing food and gender among children.

Notably, Krogager, 2012 found the gendered differences in relation to children’s food practices to be more significant than the present study. Krogager’s study was also conducted among Danish children and in a school setting, and it focused on interviews, creative co-creation and observations of snacking. It did not, however, include observations of cooking like the present study. Thus, our findings do not contradict Krogager; rather, they serve to nuance and elaborate Krogager’s points. Like Krogager, we notice that boys and girls eat differently. During her experiments, Krogager observed that the boys would start eating the different snacks on the table without asking permission much more frequently than the girls. This echoes the examples discussed in this article, where the girls’ approach to eating was much more disciplined than the boys’. What is new in our data, although these gendered patterns of eating were also noticeable, is that similar gendered patterns did not
appear during the preparation of food. Our study suggests that cooking may have become increasingly acceptable for boys, and that boys and girls cook in similar ways. This development, however, does not necessarily mean that the strong gendered norms related to eating have disappeared, particularly the idea that girls should be more reserved and responsible than boys. The boys are less restrained in satisfying their craving. These different standards might also explain why eating seems to divide the children into homosocial groups with the same standards for eating.

We cannot on the basis of our data conclude whether this hypothesis is a local phenomenon, or if it could be used as a more general diagnosis of contemporary food culture among children. It is, nonetheless, noteworthy that a similar point is described by Cairns and Johnson (2015) concerning adult women. Cairns and Johnson (2015) describe how recent dynamics in the gendering of food culture might have resulted in men increasingly overtaking home cooking. This does not mean that the standards and expectations for men and women are the same in all domains of food. Cairns and Johnson (2015) highlight that women have to balance contradictory expectation for their culinary identities. The foodie culture is seemingly opening to women, and women are increasingly expected to care about and enjoy good food. However, at the same time they are expected to hold on to traditional feminine ideals of care, slimness and moderation. Hereby, identity work in the kitchen (and at the table) is indeed contextual negotiations that are shaped by many factors including pedagogical structures and spatial organization, and this work remains more complicated for women than for men.

**Conclusion:**
This article contributes to the small corpus on food, gender and children with one of the first analyses of how gender is played out in school kitchens. It nuances the existing literature and highlights the importance of paying attention to different kinds of food practice and how they might be gendered differently by the same subjects.

Hereby, our findings suggest that further studies will help us gain a more in depth understanding of how gender is played out among children in contemporary Nordic food culture. Bearing in mind that the study took place in a school setting, gender may play a different role in other contexts. Children’s everyday lives involve various settings, and Højlund (2018) has demonstrated that children are very skilled at navigating according to different expectations in different contexts. So,
how do children perform food and gender at home, in their family or among friends? More research is needed to explore these settings and to understand how food practices challenge and reproduce traditional gender norms among this generation in the Nordic region.

More broadly, this study also relates to the longstanding and complicated discussion in gender studies on the relationship(s) between media representations and gender practices in everyday life. Are traditional media representations blindly replicated by millions of men and women? or are they cultural resources replicated, distorted and even subverted in very different ways by different people in different situations? Our study suggests the latter. The children in our study passed as very competent media users and media producers. This suggests that the basic questions in debate about children’s gender socialization through media should be reframed with focus less on the potential effects of mediated gender representation for children, and more the actual uses of these. We should understand children not as passive consumers of media, but as active users in the digital society. This also means that children’s agency should be central in our attempt to understand gender and media today versus 10 or 20 or 30 years ago. This is not to say that the digital era is “better” or “worse” from a feminist perspective than previous eras. There are many terrible examples of new forms of digital, sexual violence and harassments with enormous consequences for the victims. At the same time, there is renewed and widespread political attention on feminist issues with the #metoo movement. Both are facilitated by new media. Rather than qualifying the digital era as good or bad, our point is that media is omnipresent. Media and gendered media representations are also a part of most parts of everyday social practices. We must attain a better understanding of how this new relation to media shape the way gender is negotiated and how new media shape the social spaces in which this negotiation is unfolded.

In this regard, we would like to highlight the importance of developing new methodological approaches and scientific designs in qualitative gender studies. Our attempt in this article is an example, and we have noted many ideas for improvement in future studies. We learned, however, that digital media offers us new and easy ways of filming and recording social practices of gender. This turned out to provide a rich complement to the field notes. More importantly, new media offers us new tools to include our informants in our research and invite them to become co-creators of data. An invitation that might open new ways of gained in depth insights to the complexity of present day gender negotiations. At the same time, this invitation raises a series of issues
concerning the ethical aspects of research, the researcher/informant relation and the very nature of data.


Krogager et al. (in press). The amalgamation of media use practices and food practices in a school setting. Communication in Research and Practice (4).


