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ARTICLE

'I'm old, but I'm not old-fashioned': mealtimes and cooking practices among Danish widows and widowers

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Abstract

Existing research on how older adults handle challenges associated with domestic housework, and in particular food work, almost invariably assumes that older adults are traditionalist, and that this affects the way they adjust to widowhood. This assumption is problematic, as decades of research have emphasised increasing gender equality in food work. In this paper, I explore how older adult men and women adjust to food preparation after the loss of a spouse. Interviews with 31 Danish widows and widowers aged between 67 and 86 years old suggest that the men have made culinary progress. However, I also show that the narratives around domestic food work among the older generations remain gendered: both men and women identify widowed men's domestic food work as something meriting acknowledgement, and men and women draw on traditional masculine and feminine ways of approaching domestic food work.

Keywords: ageing; cooking; food; gender; meals; widowhood

Introduction

'Do you ever buy ready-made food?', I asked 74-year-old Jeffrey, a retired fabric worker and widower: '*Never*. *Never* have I ever bought any plate of ready-made food', he replied. Jeffrey was somewhat offended that I would even ask such a question. Yet his response also expressed evident pride in the fact that he could reject the question up front. He continued: 'I haven't had a pizza since … when was it? 1983', and laughed.

Previous studies have described a traditional division of domestic food work among older adults (Sidenvall *et al*., 2000; Moss *et al*., 2007; Sydner *et al*., 2007). Cooking has been seen as the responsibility of women and optional for men. It is therefore not surprising to find that adjustments to food activities in widowhood[1] also have been described as fundamentally gendered. The planning, provision and preparation of meals has traditionally been the woman's responsibility, and many women see these tasks as pivotal to their identity as wife and/or mother

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(*e.g.* Murcott 1982). Indeed, existing research into widowhood and food has found that women face a loss of meaning *vis-à-vis* the preparation of meals in widowhood, whereas on the loss of their spouse men face more practical challenges because they often lack even basic cooking skills (of the kind performed by women throughout their lives). The existing literature strongly suggests, therefore, that men and women adjust to food preparation in different ways when their spouse passes away (Sidenvall *et al.*, 2000; Vesnaver *et al.*, 2015*a*, 2015*b*).

Yet recent research into gender roles and food documents the development of more gender-neutral practices around domestic food preparation, especially in the younger and middle-aged generations (*e.g.* Szabo, 2012, 2014). For example, research from Norway and Denmark shows how some men in dual-working marriages experience cooking as a joint responsibility (Aarseth and Olsen, 2008). A Canadian study suggests that men think of cooking neither exclusively as leisure nor exclusively as work, but as *work-leisure* (Szabo, 2012). To my knowledge, little if any research has asked whether these changes also apply to older adults, a point that I will return to in the Background section.

Widowhood is a major, life-changing event requiring those who experience it to adjust to new tasks that may previously have been the preserve of their partner. The partner, obviously, is no longer around to carry out the tasks. In this paper, I explore how older adult men and women from Denmark cook after the loss of a spouse. Research in this area is important, not only because it helps us to understand the food-related challenges, and the strategies applied, when a profound commensal disruption such as widowhood occurs, but also because it offers new knowledge of the potential changes and role-shifts that occur with advancing age. These dynamics of older adulthood age are rarely addressed in sociological research, and this inattention implicitly reinforces the ageist perception of older adulthood as a period of stagnation (Davidson *et al.*, 2009).

Background

Food work in the domestic sphere has traditionally been women's responsibility. Food studies tend to see men's cooking practices as leisure-oriented (*e.g.* men in charge of the barbecue, food for special occasions, helping out) and women's cooking practices as care-oriented (Murcott, 1982; Charles and Kerr, 1988; DeVault, 1991). So, women's cooking is described as an other-oriented responsibility (DeVault, 1991; Hollows, 2003; Cairns *et al.*, 2010; Szabo, 2012). Men's domestic cooking is carried out in a more worry-free and playful manner, since their cooking is more limited (Hollows, 2003; Szabo, 2014). It takes a self-oriented form similar to that of a hobby.

Changing patterns around domestic food work

While women continue to do most of the domestic food work, research over recent decades has shown small signs of progress. For example, Neuman *et al.* (2017) show that Swedish men take on domestic food work, which they see as a self-evident responsibility, and that narratives about cooking suggest culinary progress among men. More than a decade ago, Aarseth and Olsen (2008) showed that in Norway

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and Denmark highly educated men aged 35–45 years in dual-working families saw cooking as a joint project and identified with the practices of everyday food work. A more recent study (Szabo, 2014) of Canadian men aged 26–58 years who undertake a significant share of the domestic food tasks shows that men who are responsible for most of the domestic food tasks draw on both traditional feminine and traditional masculine approaches to food, a finding highlighting the way gender roles can interact with levels of responsibility around domestic food work. As early as 1995, Kemmer *et al.* (1998) identified small signs of change in the domestic sharing of food work among young (aged 19–43) dual-working, heterosexual couples in Scotland. They found that while a small majority of women still had primary responsibility for domestic food work, these women did not defer to their husbands' food preferences in the way described in previous literature (*e.g.* Murcott, 1982). There are signs that cooking may no longer be viewed as low in status and as a female responsibility. Media Studies, for example, show how celebrity male chefs are reproducing traditional gender dichotomies (with the male chef's cooking being presented, for example, as leisure and play-oriented) while also reconstructing and renegotiating masculinity (*e.g.* Hollows, 2003; Leer, 2014).

To sum up, the existing literature on men, women and food suggests changing roles around domestic food work. Yet, as the next section shows, we lack studies that discuss whether such changes are also occurring among older adults.

The of lack studies of the division of domestic food work among older adults

Whereas existing research points to important changes in younger generations, it reports no such changes in older adulthood. For example, while Neumann and colleagues suggest that today we can see culinary progress among men, they also indicate that these changes are generational, and that less progress is being made by older adult men (Neuman, 2016; Neuman *et al.*, 2017). Similarly, Gatley *et al.* (2014) identify generational differences in men's cooking, with young men explaining that they cook more than their fathers. Cairns *et al.* (2010) find the same. Studies in the area of gender and domestic food work often simply do not sample older adult men and women, thereby reinforcing the idea that the increasingly equitable division of domestic food work is limited to younger generations (*e.g.* Kemmer *et al.*, ; Szabo, 2012, 2014).

Studies on widowhood reinforce the traditional picture of domestic food work in older adulthood

The few existing food studies on both widows and widowers were, as far as I have been able to determine, conducted about ten years ago and reiterate this traditional picture of domestic food work among older adult men and women. In crude terms, the limited research that does exist in this area suggests that widowers face practical challenges that can be attributed to their lack of basic kitchen skills, whereas widows face emotional challenges because they have no one to care for by cooking meals (Moss *et al.*, 2007; Davidson *et al.*, 2009). For example, Moss *et al.* (2007) describe how frail older adult men find ways to distance themselves from cooking to maintain their sense of masculinity because they consider cooking a female

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responsibility. Moreover, in Moss' study, men – whether widowed or not – describe meal preparation as something done out of necessity, not an enjoyable activity. Sidenvall *et al.* (2000) suggest that meals represent a gift for women, which is why widows do not ascribe any meaning to cooking when there is no one to cook for – and which also explains why their nutritional intake declines in those circumstances. But the research also shows small signs that widows may have an increased feeling of freedom – a feeling that they can now choose diets according to their own tastes and preferences because they do not have to provide food for others. Nevertheless, whether the existing research points to widows (a) facing a loss of meaning and/or (b) experiencing an increased feeling of freedom, it insists on stability and a traditionalist perspective when it comes to gender, domestic food work, older adulthood and adjustments to widowhood (*e.g.* Sydner *et al.*, 2007; Vesnaver *et al.*, 2015*a*, 2015*b*).

One important exception here is the work of Davidson *et al.* (2009). They conducted an extensive qualitative study of 80 independently living older adults' food lives. While the study was not confined to widowhood, the authors did point out some important new dynamics in food and widowhood. They described two ways in which widowers respond to being alone: one group approaches the new food responsibility in an enthusiastic manner; the other is reluctant to devote effort to it. Those in the second group are under-skilled. While the study shines fresh light on some previously overlooked dynamics, it still draws a rather traditional picture of women's adjustment to widowhood.

Moore and Stratton (2001) claim that widowed men, especially, are invisible or ignored in the literature on spousal loss. They argue that this invisibility is due to the belief that widowhood is a female experience, and the assumption that men, more often than women, remarry. These assumptions may be particularly relevant when it comes to food preparation in widowhood. As argued above, domestic food is constructed and considered a female domain, especially in older adulthood, so perhaps it is unsurprising if there are notably few studies dealing with widowed men and food.

Reasons to expect changes in the sharing of domestic food work in older adulthood

The persistence of this rather traditional picture of men and women's practices around domestic food work in older adulthood is surprising for several reasons. First, people who retire today (in Denmark, around the age of 67) were young in the 1960s and therefore grew up during a time where family structure, gender roles and work were questioned and underwent massive change. Cooking practices and domestic food work, likewise, changed significantly, *e.g.* with the rise in the availability of convenience products. Second, survey studies and time-use studies underline the view that while domestic work remains gendered, there has been an increase in men's cooking and a decline in women's cooking (*e.g.* Holm *et al.*, 2015). Third, it is now more than 20 years since the first studies reported early signs of more gender-neutral practices around cooking in the domestic sphere (*e.g.* Kemmer *et al.*,). The middle-aged generations observed in these studies of changing practices may very well belong to what we would classify as the older adult generation today. There are thus at least three reasons to expect that historical

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developments in gender-neutral practices identified in previous research among younger generations could be redefining what is typical in the older adult generation today.

To sum up, then, the studies on older adult widowhood we have are not numerous, and most were conducted a number of years ago. Those that do exist often depict 'traditionally gendered reactions' to widowhood: they picture men who face practical challenges and women who face emotional challenges. However, as we have no recent studies of food-related behaviour in widowhood, and more generally lack studies of cooking in older adulthood, we may underestimate changes.

My aim is to take the changes and dynamics of older adulthood into consideration. Thus, in analysing the present study data, I apply an understanding of gender as something that is constantly changing across time, culture and different social groups, and involves multiple, diverse cultural scripts on how to be male and how to be female. This way of thinking about gender is what Sobal (2005: 135) names 'multiple models of genderedness'. I also structure the presentation of the results around Szabo's concepts of traditional culinary masculinities and femininities, to show how such concepts are still relevant among older, widowed adults in some areas and not in others. These concepts are based on the literature on gender and approaches to cooking, as described in this section (Szabo, 2014). The notion of culinary masculinities refers to the typical approaches that men take to cooking, including artistic, playful and practical approaches. The notion of traditional culinary femininities refers to approaches to cooking that typify women's cooking, such as caring and nursing through food.

Methods

The present paper reports results from qualitative in-depth interviews with older adult widow(er)s living in private homes in Denmark.

Recruitment

Recruitment was according to the following inclusion criteria: participants had to be (a) 65 years old or older when entering widowhood, and (b) widowed within the last five years at the time of the interview. The first criterion was chosen for two reasons. First, at the time of recruitment this was the age at which people were entitled to a state pension in Denmark. Second, from the age of 65 Danish citizens are entitled to a visit by municipality staff when facing spousal loss. Thus, regardless of whether or not people consider themselves to be in this category at 65 years, 65 is arguably the public, or official, start of older adulthood in Denmark. The second criterion was chosen to ensure that participants would be able to recall their food-related life before and after the loss of a spouse.

Most of the widow(er)s were enrolled via a professional recruitment agency. However, four were recruited through the present author's personal network. The agency has a panel of 80,000 members in Denmark. It sent a short screening questionnaire out to all of its members above 65 years to identify those meeting the inclusion criteria. Those who did were contacted by telephone, informed about the study and asked additional questions about things such as the size of the town or

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city in which they lived. They were then asked if they wished to participate in the study.

The sample

In all, 31 elderly widows/widowers (15 widows, 16 widowers) were interviewed, aged between 67 and 86 years old. There was considerable variation in the length of time they had been widow(er)s, ranging from six weeks to five years. They resided in various parts of Denmark, in rural as well as urban areas. Specifically, 13 participants were based in urban areas (defined as conurbations with more than 50,000 inhabitants: 11 cities in Denmark satisfy this definition) and the remaining 18 came from rural areas or towns with fewer than 50,000 inhabitants. The participants were also mixed in terms of income and education. Some lived exclusively on public pensions, others had private savings to supplement their public pension. All the men had been full-time employed through most of their adult lives. Although most of the women had also been full-time employed, many had experienced periods during which they had been stay-at-home mothers. Almost all of the participants turned out to have been born in Denmark. Three participants who were born in Germany and Sweden had lived in Denmark most of their adult lives. All the participants had lived in heterosexual marriages. All were living alone, although co-habitation was not an exclusion criterion.

With a couple of exceptions, those interviewed had no ongoing reliance on welfare services. One interviewee was entitled to cleaning and shopping assistance from the municipality (but preferred to buy most groceries online anyway) and another relied on the public 'meals-on-wheels' service.

The interviews

All interviews were carried out in 2018–2019. They took place in the home of the interviewee and lasted between one and two hours. All were audio recorded using a Dictaphone and transcribed verbatim. The interview guide covered the following topics: background information (*e.g.* family situation); social network, including sources of support; educational background; employment history; economic status; health status; how and when the spouse had passed away; and, most importantly, current and former attitudes and practices related to food shopping and the planning, cooking, serving and eating of meals.

I adopted a narrative interviewing technique designed to invite the informants to describe their earlier and current food practices in detail, and to encourage them to indicate any pleasure, problems or feelings they had encountered in relation to these activities. The narrative approach entails a focus on story-telling (Bates, 2004; Gubrium and Holstein, 2009). I invited informants to tell me about their food-related routines and habits in their everyday lives, with and without their partner. They emphasised different routines depending on what they found relevant, and their stories were given more or less time depending on the storyteller. In the narrative approach, the interviewer's attention is not on the exactness of the descriptions, but rather on *how* the stories are expressed and narrated. For example, I was not interested in whether the participants actually prepared the food they said

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they prepared. Rather, I wanted to explore *the way* they talk about the food preparation. Were they, for example, proud to tell me about the food they prepare, or did they express feelings of shame? Did they vent feelings of joy when they talked about food preparation, or did they experience it as a burden?

Analysing data

In the analysis phase of the research, I listened to all the interviews and wrote memos for each to establish an overview of the data. The memos summarised how domestic food work was carried out in each of the marriages (*e.g.* who was responsible and potential changes in the division of labour), how cooking was undertaken after the loss of the spouse, and how the widowed person experiences and practises meals today. I then read through all the transcripts and coded them using a thematic approach (Kvale, 1994), using NVivo 12 for this purpose. The coding resulted in broad themes such as 'enthusiasm for cooking', 'freedom from food preparation' and 'changes in eating', and in sub-themes such as 'television and eating', 'skipping meals', 'prepacked food' and 'missing company while eating'; or it produced themes like 'network and food' and sub-themes like 'guests', 'exchanging food and favours' and 'caring through food'. The combination of a detailed approach to the data in the coding and a broader approach in the memos provided me with the basis of the analysis.

Ethical approval for the research project was obtained from the Research Ethics Committee for Health and Science, University of Copenhagen.

Results

Overall patterns of roles and responsibilities in relation to cooking

Nearly all of the 16 widower interviewees said that they made homemade meals from scratch, stating that they often did so daily. Most of these men had in fact been cooking before their wives had died, which shows that spousal death is not necessarily the main transition point for older adult men's cooking; they may have started to cook before the death of their spouses. Three of the men had taken primary responsibility for preparing meals throughout their marriages and thus directly broke with traditional gender divisions of household labour. Seven had shared the responsibility for food work on and off during other transitions in their marriage, such as retirement, illness and when the wife had a new work schedule. Six of the men had previously had limited – if any – cooking experience when their wives died. Of these, three now prepared meals from scratch, one baked his own bread and all three invited guests over for homemade dinners. Thus, in total only three men relied heavily on delivered meals, on the food work of a new girlfriend or relatives, or on daily use of convenience foods. These men also needed assistance if they had guests over for dinner – or they simply bought takeout food or ready-meals.

Nine of the 15 women in the study had taken primary responsibility for food work throughout their marriages. The remaining six women described less-traditional ways of sharing domestic food work. In two cases the now deceased man had been the main cook; one widow had shared domestic food work with her

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husband throughout their life together; and in another case the male partner took on sole responsibility for domestic food work when he retired, with the woman continuing to work. Traditional allocations of food work were, therefore, more prevalent among the widows in the study than they were among the widowers, but it is worth emphasising that this does not mean that 'alternative' or non-traditional ways of sharing domestic food work were not observed among the widows at all.

Traditional culinary masculinities: enthusiastic widowers

What stands out as the most significant difference between widows and widowers is that a significant number of the widowers, in contrast with the widows, enjoyed cooking. Enthusiasm for cooking was especially prominent among men who had either always shared this sort of work with their wives or taken over at the point of retirement – that is, among men who had chosen to cook out of interest rather than feeling forced to do it by spousal death or spousal illness. These men described the food they prepared in great detail without prompting (Andersen and Brünner, 2020). The following comments, made by Joseph – 71 years old and still working as a part-time physician – are just one example:

> So, I found three ways to use the meat [from wild pheasants]. I make spring rolls. Homemade spring rolls and I use the meat in them. Or I make pâtés. I do both – the wild pâté or the wild liver paste pâté. The other day I made sausages, three metres … I have a sausage machine and kitchen gear and whatever. The other day I had a guest and then I made a whole new recipe: wild animal hearts.

Joseph – like some of the other men – talks about food in this creative, experimental and culinarily challenging way. In this way, he turns a mundane routine into something out of the ordinary. He also manages to imbue a traditionally female routine with masculine virtue by transforming everyday food into a joyful, leisure activity. According to Szabo (2014), this way of approaching cooking exhibits a conventionally masculine perspective in which men speak about food in an almost artistic manner. It is also worth noticing that Joseph mentions his kitchen equipment, and talks about using typically male ingredients, such as food from wild animals, in various ways.

The widower participants often talked in a highly organised, detailed and technical way about the dishes they prepared. Notice the following remarks made by Jeffrey, a retired union employee whose blunt rejection of the idea of using ready-made foods was reported in the Introduction:

> Jeffrey: Then last week I just made a rolled meat sausage. That was nice. Though it took three hours to boil it. It takes a long time to prepare. It has to just be about to boil and then you have to skim it two to three times so there is no more foam. Then you turn the heat down, and then it has to stand there and simmer for two hours. Then you take it off and drip the water off and then you have to put it in a pressure … you press the hell out of it …

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and then you cool it down in the fridge. Then you take the string off it. It tastes so damn good.

Interviewer: Were you having guests over?

Jeffrey: No, that was just for myself, because I find it interesting.

Time-consuming dishes like those that Joseph and Jeffrey talk about were not necessarily prepared for the purpose of having guests over for a meal. This shows that several of the widowed men, unlike their female counterparts, still viewed cooking – even time-consuming, everyday cooking, just for oneself – as an enjoyable and self-oriented activity. These men were proud to talk about their cooking skills, and shared their tips and tricks for making the best gravy, cookies or roasts. They also described the compliments they received from friends and relatives.

To sum up, these men talked about cooking in a male way, using masculine terms, by turning cooking into a hobby, a technical skill and artistic performance. But, as I will explain below, they also performed care work through food, and thereby also drew on traditional culinary femininities.

Traditional culinary femininities: efficient widows

Interestingly, culinary details like those Joseph and Jeffrey give in the accounts they offer above are simply non-existent in the interviews with widowers. In general, widows took a rather practical and instrumental approach to food. The widow participants' aim, in preparing food, was often to provide sufficient nutrition while limiting time and effort as much as possible. The following comments made by Claire, an 84-year-old former nurse, nicely exemplify this way of adjusting to food widowhood:

Claire: So I don't bother making dinner for myself in the evening. You simply don't want to. And then it is incredibly sad to eat alone. That's another thing, right? So you don't eat much. And then I have to make sure that that little thing I actually do eat is something I really benefit from. That is what I think about, when I think about food … So in reality I should eat dinner in the morning. One should do that. I do that sometimes, then I have some leftovers I re-heat for breakfast. And then I have energy for the rest of the day. It is so silly that you eat the best meal of the day in the evening.

Interviewer: Is that something you realised after being alone?

Claire: Yes, yes, yes, because back when we were two I always made dinner. With everything. That's the way it was. Unfortunately, I never had a husband who knew how to cook.

Claire underlines that, to her, food is a matter of getting sufficient energy. She has abandoned social norms around meals and, for example, eats dinner in the morning, as it is better from a functional point of view. Notice how Claire's use of the phrase 'the best meal of the day' does not refer to the taste, the aesthetics or the

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social elements of the meal. In her view, what makes it the best meal is the fact that it contains the most energy. Like Claire, the widows were generally less enthusiastic than the widowers when talking about their meals. They often explained that they preferred not to put too much effort into preparing food just for themselves. They talked about preparing the right combination of nutritional elements in the most efficient way, as does Claire. The way these widows spoke about food preparation corresponds with what Szabo (2014) describes as traditional culinary femininities. Where traditional culinary masculinities turn cooking into a practical skill, an art or a performance, and a leisure activity, the female approach typically sees cooking as way of pleasing and caring for others; and since there is no one to cook for any more after bereavement, the effort seems pointless.

The importance of a home-cooked meal

One important difference between the widows and widowers was that many (not all) of the men rejected what they saw as 'easy solutions': they avoided buying prepacked, ready-made dishes; they refused to simply skip dinner; and they did not eat cold food. Pete, a former leader, rejects reliance on easy solutions. He did all the cooking in his marriage. When his wife was alive he put great effort into trying out new recipes. Yet he says that after the loss of his spouse he lost motivation and excitement for cooking, and he tried to simplify his meals altogether. In much the same way as that described by the widows in the sample, but Pete insists on having a warm meal every day as he has always had:

> I would NEVER buy a frozen portion of pasta or frozen pizza or something like that. Something that is not good. It has to be good … you can do that yourself, you just have to buy some fish and make something good out of it … that part I have continued doing.

Several of the men involved in the study proudly underlined that it was essential to them to make a hot, homemade meal every day. In contrast, several widows described how they had minimalised their cooking altogether. They said that they found ways to make cooking as efficient as possible. For example, they just ate the same thing several days in a row. Or they had cold food, such as a piece of bread and some cheese. Ellen, a former academic, explained that she continues to make the same dishes as she did when her husband was alive, but now splits them into smaller portions and freezes them so she can spend more of her time outside the home. For example, she gives herself time to visit art exhibitions:

> I still prepare large portions [of food], and then I divide it into some plastic containers and store it in the freezer. Then I can do almost two exhibitions in one day, right? Then I go home and just take one of these containers out, right?

Cooking – a duty for older adult women, a novelty for older adult men

Several explanations of the widowers' enthusiastic approach to cooking can be given. One is that cooking still represents a novelty for many of these men. Many of them started cooking in later life, *e.g.* around retirement. Unlike with

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the women, cooking for these men has not yet turned into a dull routine. One interviewee, John, explains that his female friend 'hates cooking':

John:	This lady, I know, she hates to cook. She almost only ever gets warm food when she is here, right?
Interviewer:	Because she finds it tedious to prepare, or what?
John:	Yes, it is like that. My wife thought so too. But then again she had also prepared food for so many years. I'm not there yet. My friend has cold meals for dinner every day. No, I couldn't live like that. I need warm food for some reason.

John exemplifies an important difference between widows and widowers: following their bereavement many men insist on preparing a warm, homemade meal every day, whereas by and large women in the same situation do not. John sees this as a product of the history one has with food (rather than gender). John's friend, and his late wife, prepared food for so many years that they became tired of doing so. John says he has not yet reached that point, as he first started cooking when he was 70 years old. Cooking represents a novelty for men like John.

Many of the women described cooking in their marriage as a duty, and something they just did without really questioning it, and explained that this is why they appreciate their newly discovered freedom from food duties. Jonna appreciates it so much that she would never dream of finding a new husband:

Jonna:	I simply don't want to cook. No, I've prepared meals all of my life. I don't want to anymore. I think it is a wonderful freedom … and of course I think it is sad to be alone, but not so sad that I could think of going out and finding a new one [husband]. I simply don't want that. It's a freedom. You can do exactly what you want to.
Interviewer:	So within in this terrible loss you have experienced, you also feel a sense of freedom?
Jonna:	Yes. Of course I don't always welcome that freedom, but when it comes to meals I really do.

So, it would appear that one important factor explaining why widowed men and women talk about their meals in different ways is the way responsibility for food was shared in the marriage before the spousal loss, rather than gender *per se*.

Gendered expectations about cooking in relation to older adulthood and widowhood

The historical relationship one has with cooking from one's marriage may also interact with gendered expectations around food, widowhood and older adulthood. We simply expect women in older adulthood to be able to cook. As a result, we (and they) do not connect the adoption of easy solutions with a lack of skill, or dependency, in older adulthood. Rather, we see easy food solutions as expressions of the priorities the older adult women have (think of Ellen, who reheats food to save time so she can enjoy art exhibitions). By contrast, when men widowed in

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older adulthood skip meals, or buy ready-made dishes, we infer that they lack skills and are trapped in a kind of dependency. Mark, a 67-year-old salesman, explains how he insists on making an easy, but homemade meal every day (as opposed to relying on ready-made alternatives): 'I do not want others to be able to say that he never gets anything to eat.' Mark says he worries what those around him will think of him if he does not prepare food. In general, the widowed men view easy meal solutions as a weakness, a sign of lack of skill and decline. Cooking a homemade meal enables them to picture themselves as independent men who, despite the loss of their wives, maintain everyday continuity. Indeed, both the widows and the widowers expressed the general view that loss of a spouse is more problematic for men than it is for women when it comes to food preparation. Kelly, a 73-year-old former secretary, explains:

> Men may do worse than women [when dealing with spousal loss and food]. Men would benefit – if they have a sick wife – from joining a cooking class or something. So that they – the day where she dies – don't just stand there saying 'What am I going to do now?'

Kelly here underlines a common and familiar gendered expectation about cooking and the older adult man and woman: in older adulthood men lack cooking skills while women do not. This expectation echoes existing research in the field of late-life widowhood and food, as was outlined above in the Background section. Perhaps the negative expectations we have about the cooking skills of older adult men may result in a situation where men's meal skipping or easy solutions is viewed as problematic, unlike women's similarly easy solutions. Thus John, a retired pharmacist, explains why it is essential for him to prepare homemade food each day:

Interviewer:	So, you told me that you never buy any prepacked food. How come?
John:	Because I can do it myself.
Interviewer:	Is it important for you to be able to do it yourself?
John:	Yes, it is.
Interviewer:	Why?
John:	Yes, because then I know I'm alive. Because the moment I cannot do it, I may as well lie down and [die]…

In John's remarks we can see that being able to cook one's own food is a matter of life and death, both literally and symbolically. For widowers such as John, dependency is essentially equivalent to death. During the interview, John explained that, to him, an older adult is someone who refuses to learn new stuff and thereby becomes passive – someone who chooses easy solutions such as prepacked food. Being active, independent and able to take care of one's own needs is essential for John. For him, it is a way of distancing himself from advanced age (and death – two things which John connects closely).

Judy, a 74-year-old retired lawyer, described her typical evening meal:

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> My dinner often ends up being some bread and the television. We would never do that when my husband was alive. But my dinner I now have in front of the television, directly off the chopping board, and it is a piece of bread and some yogurt. This is the one meal that is most irregular … This is the meal where I'm most lazy.

Other widows, in a similar vein, applied words such as 'sloppy', 'cheating' and 'laziness', or said they were 'not having a "real" meal', when they described the new and simpler meals they prepared following the loss of their spouses (Andersen and Brünner, 2020). By implication, these epithets acknowledge the discourse that a proper meal is a hot and homemade one. But when these women spoke about their 'improper' meals, they did not connect their strategies with older adulthood, or see them as signs of a lack of independence (as several of the men did). If anything, the strategies were seen by the women as part and parcel of being the very opposite of the passive, dependent person in older adulthood that the widowers associated with 'easy' or efficient meals. The strategies enabled the widows to live independent and active lives outside the home. Easy solutions provided them with time and energy to engage in other tasks and pleasures such as gardening, voluntary work and exercise, or visits to the theatre, grandchildren or art exhibitions.

So cooking is something that several of the men in the study, unlike the women, were able to take pride in, because when older adult men cook it is considered 'out of the ordinary', an achievement. Existing research on food consumption in older adulthood seems to support this explanation. It is interesting that although my results suggest that there is *nothing truly extraordinary* about older adult men who know how to cook (and do so), this does not prevent widowers from benefiting from the presumption that there is. Widows have no need to prove themselves in the same way as widowers. Their cooking skills are taken for granted, probably as a consequence of the assumption that the cooking practices of men and women in older adulthood follow traditional lines.

My data, however, also reveal a few men who would describe cooking and eating as merely a matter of survival, as did a few of the widows. Mealtimes remind these widowed individuals of their loneliness, and the preparation of meals is done in the most time-effective possible way. Within this group, the main difference between the men and the women relates to the content of what is prepared. The men relied almost entirely on prepacked or ready-made food, whereas the women ate cold food such as bread and cheese or salad.

Men also perform care work through food

Both the widowers and widows spoke about food as a tool for nurturing family members and close friends. This contrasts with previous research, which confines food-related provision of care to older adult women. Jeffrey can be seen to be using food to care for his daughter and son in the following remarks:

> Then, at New Year's Eve, it was only the daughter and me. And she doesn't like red veal, she cannot stand it. So I asked her if we should have lamb instead, and this my son doesn't like – that is just how different it is. Then I said: let's do lamb crowns. She said yes, and then I darn well had to find lamb crowns, and it was amazing. It was really good. I never made that before, but it simply became really good.

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Jeffrey is aware of his daughter's and son's differing preferences, and he takes pride in cooking what they like. Many of the men I interviewed who did cook spoke proudly about nurturing family members or friends with food. When I interviewed Allan, he explained that his son and daughter-in-law would visit him in a few weeks, and that he had planned the dinner in detail. He explained where he would buy the specific fish he wanted, how he would make the sauce, where he found the recipe, and so on. Widows explained in a similar way that they had made their grandchildren's favourite dish, or cake, or exchanged food for help. But caring for others through food was not something that *only* the women did.

Again, both widows and widowers explained how they had lost the motivation to cook since there was no one to please or care for. Thus Martin, a 76-year-old retired academic, described how he had shared the domestic food work with his former wife but after she died had simply lost his motivation for preparing homemade meals. He said he now lived on prepacked foods and had even stopped laying the table. He ate standing at the kitchen table. He explained: 'I guess it is because I don't have anyone to cook for – there is no one that I need to impress or make happy.' Thus, to Martin, cooking is a matter of pleasing and caring for others, and he has therefore lost motivation to cook in widowhood. In the literature, this is described as a typically female way of responding to food preparation in widowhood. Yet in this example (and other similar cases) we see how widowed men may also exhibit what Szabo (2014) names traditional culinary femininities. Thus, when we look at the way men and women adjust to life with food in widowhood, it may not make sense to talk about culinary femininities, or masculinities. Doing that, we risk overlooking important dynamics. For example, in the case of Martin we risk interpreting his prepacked food as a sign that he lacks skills, rather than as an emotional response to cooking. Having made this error, we may fail to offer him suitable help.

Discussion

Although the distributions of men and women across ways of approaching cooking in this study are probably not generalisable, a few important things stand out when I compare my results with findings in existing studies. First, in the present investigation the proportion of men who relied on meals from 'outside' the home was much smaller than I had anticipated it would be: it was a minority of the men interviewed. The dominant picture in previous studies is one of 'helpless' older adult men with very few skills in food preparation (*e.g.* Moss *et al.*, 2007). My results document wider variability in older adult men's cooking.

Second, around half the interviewees spoke about sharing domestic food work with their former partner in a traditional way, underlining the fact that the traditional division of labour is still common among older adult couples. However, the claim that roles and responsibilities around food work in older adulthood are traditional would be simplistic, as more than half of the interviewees did not follow traditional practices. So, although traditionalism was indeed observed, it was not as prevalent as existing research leads one to expect.

Third, the study identifies an enthusiastic approach to cooking among widowed men. The group of enthusiastic men in this study described meal preparation in

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proud terms. This group is similar to the group of widowers identified by Davidson *et al.* (2009) in their study of food in older adulthood. But where Davidson and colleagues argue that the enthusiastic widowed men in their sample turned something traditionally feminine into a performance demonstrating masculine virtues to retain the sense of male identity, I do not think that this is the only aim or motivation of the more eager cooks among the men in my sample. The pride and enthusiasm of the widowers I interviewed were linked to an experience of personal growth similar to that described by Carr (2004) in her study of older adults' adjustments to widowhood. These men obtain a psychological reward from their own and others' recognition (including mine) that they are capable of managing tasks previously carried out by their spouses. Also this psychological reward may very well be gendered: that is, it may be reliant on the fact that we do not expect men in older adulthood to be capable of cooking, so that when they do, they benefit from it more than widows do. We seem simply to expect that older adult women will be able to cook, as a result of applying a culturally ageist perception that men and women in older adulthood will act in traditional ways. There may, therefore, be more shame in being an older adult widowed man who chooses prepacked meal solutions than there is in being an older adult widow who does so, and therefore also more status in being an older adult man who can cook. However, this is a hypothesis that calls for further research.

Another, related explanation for these men's enthusiastic approach to cooking is that cooking, for many of them, remains a novelty. It has not yet turned into a dull routine (as it did for many of the women, by contrast, some time ago). This suggests that although gendered reactions to food preparation in widowhood are discernible in the data, these reactions are a matter of how domestic food work is shared in the marriage, not the result of gender or age *per se*. A few men in the study felt that their cooking skills did not measure up to inviting guests over for dinner. Some said they would still have guests, but use takeaway alternatives or invite the guests to restaurants. But these alternatives are more expensive, and not something everyone can afford. Thus, there may be a risk of social isolation for individuals who lack kitchen skills and adequate disposable income or savings.

The present study has some limitations. First, the study context is Denmark, a country that along with Sweden is a top scorer in the 2019 European Union Gender Equality Index (European Institute for Gender Equality, 2019). Thus, Denmark represents one of the frontrunners in gender equality and this may influence the domestic sharing of household tasks, and therefore the results presented in this paper. Second, the sample consisted of a rather ethnically homogenous group of individuals. Only three people were born and raised outside Denmark – and all three came from neighbouring countries with a rather similar history in terms of the division of domestic food work (Holm *et al.*, 2015). Thus, there may be greater variability in the ways cooking and eating are approached in widowhood in the general Danish population than that identified here. Third, widowhood is not a static life stage (Blieszner, 1993). Experiences, values and routines around food may evolve over time, and the study does not assess whether there are differences between recently widowed individuals and individuals who have been widowed for several years. There are small signs in the literature that this may be the case. Vesnaver *et al.* (2015*b*) describe food behaviour in widowhood as a two-stage process in which

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widows first experience temporary disruption and then re-establish food systems matching their preferences and values. However, the study reported by Vesnaver and colleagues samples only widows. In short, then, further investigations using longitudinal data to assess whether experiences of food and eating change between recent and long-time widowhood, and examining both men and women, are needed.

Conclusion

In this paper I have shown how certain changes come about in later life. The study I have reported and discussed suggests that the currently prevailing picture of 'helpless' older adult widowers may be out of date, and that reactions to food preparation in widowhood are not as traditional as the existing literature suggests. Yet, the approaches widowed men and women apply to food preparation are still in some ways traditional. So it would seem that while men take typically masculine approaches to food preparation, they also draw on more typically culinary femininities such as using cooking as way to care for and nurse family members. Also the widows do not only respond to food preparation after the loss of a spouse in only emotional ways, they often approach cooking in a very practical manner. In line with Szabo's (2014) findings, the conclusions drawn in this paper therefore question a strict dichotomisation of gender roles around food preparation.

This paper is entitled 'I'm old but I'm not old-fashioned', which is a quote from a male participant whom I asked whether he prepares food himself. He underlines that although he is old in terms of chronological age, this does not necessitate that he is traditionalist. When sociological studies investigate changes in everyday routines or 'new' tendencies in a population group, they tend to neglect focusing on such changes when they occur among older adults. They dismiss older adults from their analytic samples, or they fail to report results for them, which is problematic from a 'scientific', sociological point of view, as research in this way implicitly assumes and supports the ageist perception of older adulthood as a phase of stagnation. This lack of focus on older adults is unfortunate for at least three reasons. First, older adults make up a sizeable proportion of the population, and one that is growing, in most developed countries (World Health Organization, 2018). Second, few population groups undergo as substantial, and often as abrupt change, as older adults do, and we are merely socialised into thinking that these changes are foreseeable (Ferraro, 2018). Widowhood, for example, is considered an on-time event at an advanced age. Third, when we do study older adulthood there is a tendency to assume that the individuals we are considering act and think in traditional ways. This is especially true when it comes to gender and ageing. Here, we tend to frame ageing along gender dichotomies, and then explain the differences between men and women as a matter of (gender) roles (Hatch, 2000). Changes in everyday routines, social roles and identity among older adults thus constitute an important sociological process in a group that is demographically important, likely to be misunderstood as a result of the very concept of advanced age which defines it and tends to be overlooked in research.

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Note

1 When I use the term widow(er) and its cognates, it refers to older adults only.

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