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Sociology

Bare Fridges and Burnt Tortillas: Conflictual Moments in the Making of Coupledom

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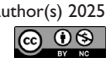

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Abstract

This article investigates how conflicts emerge and unfold among newly cohabiting couples during the daily practices of making and sharing dinner. Adopting a 'moments approach', findings from an ethnographic study involving 12 couples reveal how conflictual moments emerge from clashes between individuals' dispositions regarding responsibilities (who does what), standards (what is appropriate) and techniques (how things are done). Clashes are reflected upon through a process of *zooming in* and *zooming out* where conflicting gendered, classed and cultural dispositions emerge. At the conceptual level, conflictual moments are identified as epistemic and affective scenarios revealing broader structural and socio-cultural inequalities permeating domestic life of heterosexual couples.

Keywords

cohabiting couples, conflicts, conflictual moments, dormant dispositions, meal practices

Introduction

For newly cohabiting couples, sharing the everyday meal carries symbolic meanings of romantic love, commitment and mutual respect (Marshall, 2005). Creating a stable meal routine, in which food is shared and rituals are formed, enables couples to transition from

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singlehood to coupledom (Bove and Sobal, 2006; Kemmer et al., 1998; Marshall and Anderson, 2002). Merging habits and preferences is not an easy adjustment process, but existing studies suggest that couples resolve their differences through compromises and negotiations (Bove et al., 2003; Darmon and Warde, 2019). While many conflicts might be solved over time, little is known about the unresolved ones and how individuals deal with these compromises. In particular, there is limited understanding about how conflicts arise during daily meals and how newly cohabiting couples make sense of them.

Considering this gap in understanding everyday meals, this study focuses on the emergence of conflicts, their recurrence through time and their implications for the formation of coupledom. Theoretically, we draw on Giddens' (1991, 1992) notion of coupledom and Kaufmann's (1994, 2009, 2010) perspectives on conflicts in new couple relationships. The premise of this research is guided by these questions: how do conflicts emerge in the doing of the everyday meal? What do conflicts reveal about the formation of coupledom? To answer these questions, conflicts are methodologically and theoretically framed as *conflictual moments* characterised as 'telling moments' revealing 'patterns of relationship experience', showing 'close-up insights that effectively and affectively capture the essence of relationships' (Gabb and Fink, 2015: 971). Findings, based on an ethnographic study of 12 newly cohabited couples living in London, show how conflictual moments arise around the mundane and taken-for-granted materiality of the everyday meal. Conflicts emerge as clashes between individual dormant dispositions regarding responsibilities (who does what), standards (what is appropriate) and techniques (how things are done).

The contributions of this article are twofold. First, we unveil how individual reflexivity is at play during mundane conflictual moments. If previous research looked at reflexivity in major critical events (Giddens, 1991; Thomson et al., 2002), this study shows how reflexivity operates through a process of zooming in (addressing individual dormant dispositions) and zooming out (reflecting on active dispositions). Second, in unpacking this process, we provide a novel understanding of the inequalities of domestic and family life. While studies on foodwork and foodcare highlight gendered inequalities (Parsons et al., 2024), our work further unpacks such inequalities revealing their classed and cultural facets. In doing so, the article demonstrates how conflictual moments are epistemic and affective scenarios in which clashes among individuals' dispositions intersect with broader structural and socio-cultural intersecting inequalities of domestic and family life.

The Making of Coupledom at Dinner Time

Giddens' (1992: 58) foundational work on contemporary coupledom highlights how couples establish a 'pure relationship', which is:

> a situation where a social relation is entered into for its own sake, for what can be derived by each person from a sustained association with another; and which is continued only in so far as it is thought by both parties to deliver enough satisfaction for each individual to stay within.

Considering the voluntary and pragmatic nature of intimate relationships – which are more and more liberated from social and structural obligations – reflexivity plays a key

role in developing stability, mutual trust and a sense of shared identity. Reflexivity is characterised by the constant monitoring and critical examination of democracy, equality and autonomy in every aspect of the couple's lives (Giddens, 1991, 1992). A pure relationship implies that individuals can reflexively work on their shared project of creating coupledom, linking past accumulated biographical identities to their present and imagined future identity explorations.

Giddens' notion of a pure relationship has been criticised for providing an over-optimistic view of heterosexual relationships and for ignoring the structural and cultural context in which couples are inserted (Jamieson, 1999). For example, empirical studies investigating foodwork within the family show that gendered inequalities still prevail (Cappellini et al., 2014; Devault, 1997), with everyday stories of couples exemplifying the power struggles of women (Björnberg, 2004; Christopher, 2021). While men are increasingly involved in foodwork, their engagement is often a symbolic task (Szabo, 2013), while women handle the invisible material and emotional labour (Parsons et al., 2024). Despite these limitations, Giddens' understanding of coupledom remains a useful theoretical tool to investigate how couples plan their domestic life. Kemmer et al. (1998: 69), for instance, show how young cohabiting couples adjust their schedules and food preferences to share the evening meal, seen not just as a way of consuming food but 'often regarded as an opportunity to sit down together, enjoy the same activity and the same food, and talk together'. Considering the centrality of the meal, as Marshall (2005: 82) alludes, 'to symbolise the relationship between participants', it is not surprising that couples go through extensive negotiation to finalise a shared routine.

Establishing a meal routine requires compromises since individuals' preferences and habits merge to form a 'joint spousal food system' (Bove et al., 2003: 25) or 'commensal pact' (Darmon and Warde, 2019: 1025) around what is eaten, when, how and with whom. Although some individualised food preferences and choices remain (Bove et al., 2003), prior research suggests that couples resolve their conflicts and establish a shared routine. Yet, little is known about conflicts that remain unsolved and how they unfold in the everyday making of coupledom.

A Moments Approach to Study Everyday Conflicts

Conflicts have been understood as incompatible ideas, goals and behaviours, creating antagonism between the partners (Bove et al., 2003). Kaufmann's (1994) work on conflicts discusses how their inevitable presence in new couple relationships is a sign of the formation of coupledom. This is because every person brings with them a set of biographically accumulated dispositions or habits from their cultural systems into a relationship. Dispositions can be dormant or active, manifesting at the bodily level such as display of preferences, or at the intellectual level such as customs, conventions and inherited ideologies (Kaufmann, 1994, 2010). The formation of coupledom emerges from a process in which individuals readjust their dormant and active disposition to create a shared routine. Although Kaufmann recognises the difficulties of such a process, he sees it as a positive one leading to compromises, agreements and the ultimate formation of coupledom. Darmon and Warde's (2016, 2019) study on Anglo-French couples provides empirical support for Kaufmann's theory. Over time, couples created a commensal

pact, which consists of shared dietary and temporal patterns. Having interviewed couples about how they make sense of their agreed routines, Darmon and Warde (2016) provide an overall positive overview of how individuals use resources from their past, to match their partner's dispositions. Relying mainly on individuals' retrospective accounts, these studies analysed negotiations after tensions were resolved and shared routines were established. As such, little is known about how conflicts arise and unfold.

To understand how conflicts emerge in interactions, we adopt a 'moments approach' (Gabb and Fink, 2015: 970), allowing us to study how individual dispositions can cause clashes of ideals, and ideas during the making of the everyday meal. Giddens (1991) draws attention to 'fateful moments', which are extraordinary moments requiring individuals to be reflexive and make choices. Inspired by Giddens' work, Thomson et al. (2002) looked at how young people reflexively understood major events as critical moments changing the course of their lives. Other sociological and anthropological works advocate for looking at mundane moments, which allows researchers to look at the everydayness of people's lives and show how such moments intersect with broader socio-cultural contexts (see Trigger et al., 2012). In analysing people's diaries about their long-term couple relationships, Gabb and Fink (2015: 978) identify mundane *telling* moments – including having dinner or going for a walk – which are 'emotional scenarios' revealing how individuals feel and interact with each other but also how such interactions intersect with broader gendered social relations. Guided by this body of work, we study *conflicts* as *telling moments* as they emerge from observing newly cohabiting couples sharing the everyday meal. Instead of relying on participants' reflective and retrospective accounts, our approach examines conflicts in the making and investigates participants' reflexivity as it emerges from their performance. We conceptualise conflictual moments as emotional and epistemic scenarios revealing how clashing dispositions are felt and understood as they unfold through performances.

Methods

Our ethnographic study consisted of a one-year participant observation and in-depth semi-structured interviews with 12 newly cohabited couples residing in London. The first author conducted the fieldwork after receiving ethical approval from her institution. Couples were recruited via a snowball sampling strategy (Parker et al., 2019), with advertisements shared across social media platforms calling for newly cohabited couples. The criteria for selecting couples were that they needed to be: (1) cohabiting for fewer than six months at the start of the study, following guidelines on identity-transitions in the first year of cohabitation (e.g. Schramm et al., 2005); (2) interested and involved in eating meals together; (3) living in London, to provide homogeneity in analysing the structural constraints of a metropolitan city and how this influences everyday life. A total of 12 couples, aged between 25 and 36, with higher education degrees, participated in the study. Couples varied in terms of their ethnic backgrounds and occupations. All self-identified as being middle class, mainly due to their current lifestyle and occupation. Three couples in the study eventually got married, and five couples broke off their relationship. The discovery of these separations by the first author was often coincidental via social media posts or direct messaging. While this might be surprising, it is

noteworthy to mention that couples were interviewed and observed at the very initial stage of their cohabitation (see Table 1 for participant profiles and fieldwork information).

The ethnographic fieldwork consisted of accompanying couples on their grocery shopping trips, visiting them at home to observe how they planned and prepared their meals, and having meals with them. Each couple was visited once a month for five to nine months over the one-year period. With participants' consent, speech-in-action audio was recorded while couples performed their meals, along with taking fieldnotes and photographs. Individual and joint interviews were carried out to supplement observations, with each couple being interviewed together at the beginning of the study then separately after a few observations. In total, each couple was observed at least four times and had three interviews (joint and separate).

Fieldwork data resulted in over 130 hours of audio recordings, 960 pages of transcriptions and 2000 photographs. The speech-in-action recordings and interviews were transcribed and analysed using thematic analysis (Terry et al., 2017). Photographs were categorised into themes and provided a visual representation for the transcripts and fieldnotes. Although the project started out with exploring how collective routines emerge, the first author found herself in the middle of several conflictual moments, which were accidental moments (Fujii, 2015) revealing unexpected elements of everyday meals and coupledom. The first author could not control the timing of the eruption, nature, length nor the conclusion of such moments. However, prompt questions were asked and fieldnotes were taken, keeping in mind the ethical principles of safeguarding the well-being of participants during the fieldwork (Khanijou and Pirani, 2020). Inspired by the moments approach, which isolates moments from the overall data set (Thomson et al., 2002), we identified and thematically analysed conflictual interactions from fieldnotes and speech-in-action recordings based on their quality, intensity and recurrence. Conflictual moments were interpreted through the existing literature on family meals, coupledom and conflicts.

A conflictual moment was analytically considered (and then isolated from the rest of the data) as an exchange in which the researcher or the participants, or both, considered having conflictual traits, such as a sudden and emotionally intense interaction in which clashes of dispositions had to be addressed. It could be an apparently inconsequential exchange (e.g. selecting vegetables at the supermarket) or a heated confrontation (e.g. accusations about division of domestic labour) in which the flow of the interaction was interrupted and those involved had to 'stop short and think again' (Gabb and Fink, 2015: 973).

To convey the usefulness of our approach for an in-depth understanding of conflictual moments, we focus on three specific cases. The selected cases epitomise some of the most recurrent conflicts that are around the definition of responsibilities (who does what), the definition of standards (what is appropriate) and the definition of techniques (how to do things). Participants' conflictual and reflexive interactions were examined through our own concepts of *zooming in* (dealing with individual dormant dispositions) and *zooming out* (reflecting on active dispositions). Zooming in refers to interactions in which individuals deal with the practical matters under scrutiny (e.g. the way food is

Table 1. Participant profiles.

#	Pseudo names	Nationality	Age	Occupation	Cohabitation at time of 1st visit	Total number of observations and interviews
1	Hannah & James	German & English	31 & 36	Credit Controller & English Teacher	1st month	8
2	Joanne & Tom	Both English	26 & 27	Restaurant Manager & PhD Student	6th month	7
3	Sara & Nick	Chinese & English	30 & 27	Media PhD Student & IT Engineer	6th month	7
4	Olivia & Alex	Italian & Portuguese	26 & 28	Project Manager & IT Security Consultant	2nd month	9
5	Julia & William	Canadian & English	33 & 36	PhD Student & IT Sales	6th month	5
6	Max & Pia	Italian & English	28 & 30	Finance Banker & Psychologist	3rd month	7
7	Vanna & Simon	Indian & Italian	27 & 29	Researcher & IT Consultant	4th month	7
8	Milena & Bernard	Thai & French	29 & 31	Project Manager & Statistician in a Bank	1st month	7
9	Barbara & Roberto	Both Italian	27 & 28	Data Analyst & IT Consultant	2nd month	7
10	Jenny & Paul	Indian & English	31 & 35	School Teacher & Project Manager	3rd month	7
11	Annie & Chris	Serbian & Portuguese	31 & 33	Accountant & Web Developer	5th month	9
12	Harry & Emily	Both English	30 & 28	Physicist & Biologist	3rd month	7

cooked, or ingredients are selected), while zooming out refers to interactions in which individuals reflect upon broader meanings of the conflicts (e.g. gender equality at home).

Findings

Defining Responsibilities: Sara and Nick

Sara and Nick met while studying at university. Being from China, Sara was brought up in what she considers a 'privileged family' who did not encourage her to enter the kitchen. Her mother is what she describes as an 'independent woman who has a full-time job [. . .] this is typical in China nowadays, women do not want to be housewives'. Compared to Sara, Nick's upbringing was less privileged. His parents divorced when he was young, and he grew up living in between his parents' and grandparents' houses, and from time to time in care homes. Since the age of 16, he started living and earning by himself to pay for his college and expenses. Food has never been important in his upbringing, and he often opted for foods such as 'microwave meals' that could just be 'put in the freezer'. He rarely had family meals growing up.

In an interview Sara reveals her active disposition about gendered division of domestic labour: 'I've always wanted to be with a man who can cook.' Being with a partner who can share the domestic responsibility is important as she self-identifies as a feminist and a career woman. In fact, one of the reasons she fell in love with Nick was because when he realised she could not cook very well, she remembers him saying 'I'm going to cook for you [. . .] and in the beginning of our relationship he would be the one who cooks and I would help and clean afterwards.' However, upon cohabitation, Sara feels she is becoming solely responsible for all the domestic tasks in the household, as she reveals in their sixth month of cohabitation:

> We barely cook together because actually housework at our place is quite gendered. I do most of the housework. So I do most of the cooking [. . .] in the beginning, we did have a division of task but it was highly voluntary until one day, I don't know what, how and why, he just stopped doing the housework. And I had to do it because I do want our house to be clean and I want to eat proper food [. . .] I don't like cooking. Because I am so busy with my life and I personally don't like housework being gendered. I studied feminism and I categorise myself as a feminist, but my boyfriend doesn't give a s*** about it. I try not to go into this kind of discussion with him, because each time it would just end up being a quarrel. (Sara)

The change in the division of domestic labour that Sara describes, although she does not know how it happens – 'don't know what, how and why' – is problematic as it exposes the unbalanced responsibilities around food provision and other domestic tasks. Her language reflects the frustration she experienced in seeing how the changes have deteriorated her role in the relationship and overall, her ideal of a balanced relationship. Nick has a different view, seeing the change as a practical consequence of their daily schedule:

> This might sound a bit nasty, but she has more time than me. And in all fairness, I've eaten two meals at work. So when I get home, I'm not extremely hungry, I'm just physically not. Like I've eaten two decent meals at work [. . .] But Sara is determined on eating so. (Nick)

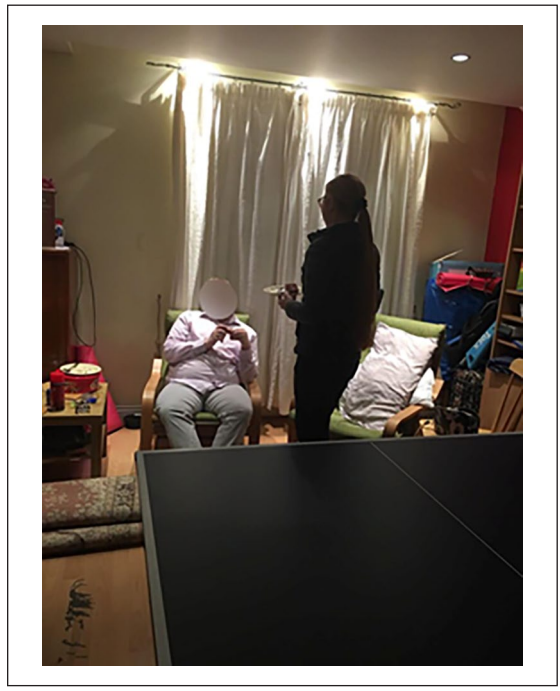

Figure 1. Sara serves the food while Nick plays a game on his phone.

These different gendered dispositions erupted several times during observations, creating clashes between the couple. For example, in the eighth month of cohabitation, a conflictual moment emerged while the first author was present during a meal observation. Sara had prepared boiled vegetables with tuna that night. She informs how she made the same meal for lunch, but Nick did not have his share, therefore she makes a fresh meal for him, while microwaving his uneaten lunch for herself. Sara's planning is revealing of her effort in preparing food for Nick that she considers better than her own. This sacrificial aspect of her planning echoes previous work on women and foodcare (Parsons et al., 2024), showing the affective side of doing foodwork aimed at caring for family members. Nick was in the bedroom while food was being prepared but re-joined the dining room where Sara served the food. While she served, Nick kept playing on his phone and did not show any attempt to help (see Figure 1). While eating dinner, they had a heated discussion:

> Sara: I really hate it when people say 'oh, men are better at something, women are better at something'. No, it's got a lot to do with education. If you educate men and women the same way, there is not going to be much of a difference.

> Nick: I'm going to go against that and say it's evolution [. . .] As far as evolution goes, people get better at stuff that they are doing for generations. Like women are better at multi-tasking. In ancient times, women would be left to look after their kids, and they had to keep watch of their kids from predators. So that's generally what the role of women were. And if there were 10

kids, you had to multi-task. You had to look after each kid and there are different processes for each, it's just how people's brains are wired.

Sara: I disagree. It's got to do a lot more with their upbringing than how they were genetically made or whatever [. . .] Last time we had this discussion he wanted me to leave.

Nick: Yeah! It's annoying! I told her to literally get out. She was basically just screaming about gender roles [. . .] I would say from what I've seen in British culture, I can't say from anywhere else in the world, women generally have an easier ride than men –

Sara: [cuts him] yeah guess what I'm doing

Nick: yeah you do all the housework because you are going to be doing it anyway. Like for example when she cooks, she is going to cook anyway regardless

Sara: So you think putting your food in your plate does not take effort, does not require time?

Nick: I'm saying, that extra 30 seconds' effort –

Sara: yeah, what if I don't want to spend that extra 30 second effort –

Nick: that's fine, you don't have to. I've said it today, I've said it multiple times in the past few weeks. Don't worry, I'm fine. I don't want to say it again. I'm not being funny but if someone is spending 15 hours a day [working] at home every day, whereas if someone is out at work 12 hours a day. If I was working from home, I'll have no problems in cooking, I'll cook. But I don't work from home. I spend 12–13 hours out of the house. So I don't think this is unreasonable for her to make food for me. . . if she is going to be cooking for herself as well.

The above exchange reveals a critical moment in which individual dispositions about responsibilities erupt around the making and serving of the everyday meal. In zooming in into the matter of the dispute (meal preparation), both parties justify their disposition mentioning their daily schedules, working life and domestic effort. This is followed by a zooming out phase in which the matter of dispute becomes less relevant, and active dispositions about gender clearly emerge and reveal how the mundane matter of who cooks dinner is in fact intertwined with broader gendered norms around equality. This conflictual moment also reveals the affective scenario in which confrontations of different dispositions take place. Reflecting on different dispositions happens through the eruption of negative emotions including resentment and frustration. After the heated exchange, Sara quickly changes the conversation, but she reminded him to be appreciative of her foodwork: 'I do make food for you, ok? You just need to appreciate it', and changes the topic. It is not surprising to see that after a cohabitation that lasted one year and six months, Sara and Nick split up.

Defining Standards: Julia and William

Julia and William met at their local pub and decided to move in together after three months of dating. William grew up in a middle-class suburb of London and works in IT

sales. William would watch his parents take turns in the kitchen and would occasionally help them with picking and sorting the vegetables grown in the garden. His family would 'always' have a family meal together, which comprised of 'lots of salad, fresh food daily'. Sharing a meal is considered a key element of family life and is a practice that William wants to replicate with his partner. Julia did not share such a privileged childhood and does not consider sharing a meal a crucial practice of family life. She is from Canada but has been in the UK for the past four years, where she is currently completing her PhD. Her parents separated when she was a teenager. She highlights how they rarely had family meals growing up: 'My dad worked long hours, so he'd come home when we had already finished eating. My mom would cook something simple or order takeaways for us.' When asked about the type of food she ate, Julia mentions how she grew up with 'McDonald's, fried chicken, and microwavable foods or Chinese takeaways if dad was there'. Her mother is what she describes as 'the Queen of convenience' and her father 'has probably never cooked a single dish in his entire life'.

William moved into Julia's flat with her three cats. In remembering their first month of cohabitation, William reveals the difficulties of accepting Julia's standards of cooking and cleaning:

> Basically she doesn't really cook. When I first came, her fridge was bare, like I was terrified. I looked into the fridge and saw like leftover bits of takeaway food, ketchup, mayonnaise that was about six months old. Uh. . . So, it was horrific [..] I was like I cannot take this, like, so I defrosted the fridge and the freezer, and I cleaned them, and then I bought real food. It was really horrific, if I'm going to be honest. (William)

When asked about her existing habits, Julia justifies her lack of culinary capital by reflecting on her upbringing:

> Julia: You know what my mom is like, she's like the queen of convenience, she's like [imitates her Mum] microwave mashed potatoes and microwave rice, and this will only take one minute.
>
> William: Yeah, it's where you got it all from.
>
> Julia: Yeah, I like it to be faster.
>
> William: [turns to the researcher] I bet her mom's fridge would have nothing apart from beers and mayonnaise, and ketchup.

In the above excerpts, William reflects upon the mismatch of dormant dispositions around their standards of cooking and cleaning and, crucially, considers his to be the 'appropriate' ones to be followed. After zooming in to the mundane matter of the cleanliness of the fridge, William and Julia zoom out and reflect on their upbringing, different culinary capitals and classed sensitivities. William's middle-class active disposition of having a family meal was confronted with the vision of a 'bare fridge', which he felt had to be cleaned and filled with 'real food':

William: I'm like a house husband. Let's be honest. I go to work as well, but mainly –

Julia: I come downstairs, and he's scrubbing the bottom for the appliance, and I'm like why are you washing the bottom of the coffee machine? And he's like it's dirty [..] I've been trying to do more lately because he did have a go at me a couple of weeks ago where he said like I feel like I'm doing too much, and you're not doing enough, and I was like maybe if I want to keep you around, I should probably start doing more stuff.

This exchange is particularly revealing of the active gendered and classed dispositions that are at play. William's responsibility of the foodwork in the household is framed as a response to Julia's inability to keep up with his classed expectations and standards. By referring to himself as a house husband, William places himself in a position of exception, which is confirmed by Julia's acknowledgement of the unequal distribution of domestic labour and its possible impact on their relationship ('if I want to keep you around, I should probably start doing more stuff'). A conflictual moment around standards was also witnessed at the local supermarket. At the vegetable section, they had the following exchange:

Julia: This one? [as William adds the organic tomato to the trolley]

William: Yes, there is not much price difference

Researcher: So how come you are getting the organic one?

Julia: Because he wants the organic one. Honestly, I feel it doesn't even mean anything. You can call just anything organic nowadays. Like why is it called organic? Just because you cornfed your chicken?

William: It tastes better

In the above excerpt, William's assertive tone is another attempt at reclaiming his own standards over Julia's. The presence of a third person (the first author) may have accelerated the conclusion of that conflictual moment, posing positionality dilemmas for the researcher (Khanijou and Pirani, 2020). The organic tomatoes remained in the shopping basket, and they purchased them anyway, indicating the sudden eruption of dormant dispositions that need to be confronted, although very briefly. This exchange also illustrates the dominant position of William's middle-class dispositions over Julia's. Although Julia and William initially compromised their different dispositions, their conflicts continued through time until they split up.

Defining Techniques: Vanna and Simon

Vanna and Simon met at university and decided to cohabitate after several months of courtship. Simon is from Italy and has been in the UK for three years. At the start of the research, Simon was completing his PhD in IT after which he transitioned into a full-time job. He proclaims himself as an avid cook who is interested in food and eating. Growing

up in a middle-class family, Simon developed an interest in cooking while living at home. Foodwork is for Simon a matter of learning new skills and being creative, confirming studies on men's discourses on meals as a matter of leisure (Szabo, 2013). Vanna is from India but has been studying in the UK for the past 10 years and has been working for two years in a pharmaceutical company. She describes her familial upbringing as patriarchal but also privileged where her mother planned the household meals, but they had several domestic helpers cooking the food. Family meals were important, and food needed to be prepared fresh on the day as her father did not like re-heated food: 'Everything has to be done with the way he [Vanna's father] likes.' When she moved to the UK at 18 for her bachelor's degree, Vanna learnt to cook for herself preparing daily fresh meals.

Simon and Vanna romanticise about cooking together and sharing their culinary capital with each other, which, they argue is a key part of their relationship. The couple reveal how they both 'love cooking and talking about food' (Vanna). They both proclaim themselves as foodies and like to attempt complicated dishes from scratch. For instance, they reveal how during their initial dating period, they spent the whole day trying to make sourdough pizza together and even tried different variations until it was satisfactory: 'This is a common thing we have, our love for cooking' (Simon). Considering this shared passion, it is not surprising to see that the evening meal is an important moment for the couple since they share the planning and preparation of new recipes that can be integrated into their routinised weekday meals (see Marshall and Anderson, 2002). However, the realisation of such plans reveals some clashes that are due to their individual dormant and active dispositions around how to do things. In their fifth month of cohabitation, the couple manifest different techniques of storing food (see Figure 2a and b):

> [They had fajitas that night using supermarket bought tortilla wraps. After finishing, there were a few wraps left in the packet. Simon encloses it with a rubber band and puts it in the cupboard, while he was doing this, Vanna asked:]
>
> Vanna: Did you close it?
>
> Simon: I closed it yeah
>
> Vanna: This is why it dries, exactly why it dries
>
> Simon: Yeah ok Vanna, I don't know how to do it, so you do it. I can watch you.
>
> Vanna: Then you can clean the pan. . . . [turns to the researcher] Simon doesn't seal it, and that's why they go bad. The one that's sealed from this week was absolutely fine.
>
> Simon: Oh the one I ate? [teases]
>
> Vanna: That wasn't the sealed one
>
> Simon: Wasn't it? Seal it, seal it. . . . Just wants to put fire on things

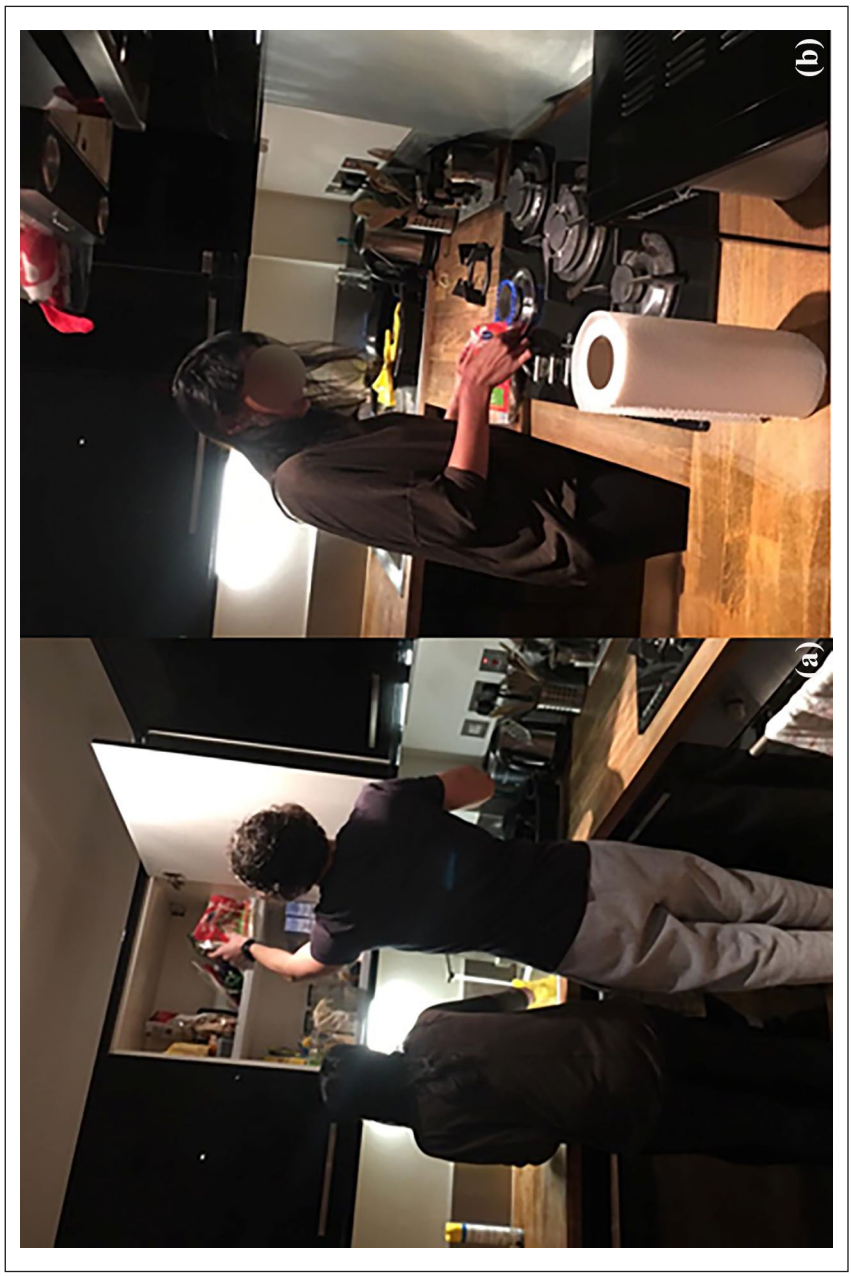

Figure 2. (a, b) Difference in techniques of storing leftovers.

Vanna: No Simon, it stays fine. And even on this one, he freaks out, because it smells of plastic, obviously I'm burning plastic.

[she takes the plastic pack, and seals it with the gas fire]

Vanna: That's what you have to do, it stays perfect. Normal kitchen that's what they do

Simon: [mumbles]

In the above excerpt, the couple confronts their different dormant dispositions around storing fajita wraps. In zooming in into the material matter, they reflected upon their informed knowledge on how to store food from getting dry and stale, but should the wraps be stored by simply binding the packet with a rubber band, or through burning the plastic to create an airtight seal? The couple tried to justify their individual techniques, zooming out the specific matter by reflecting upon their cultural difference. Vanna is used to sealing packs with fire, and she refers to this practice as 'normal kitchen that's what they do' implying the normality of such storage practices in India. Her reference to the state of the food ('they won't go bad' and 'it stays perfect') might also involve a justification from science, a subject she claims to specialise in. For Simon, the act of burning plastic is toxic and considered a health hazard. This unsolved conflict was revisited the same evening during the cooking of the tortilla wraps (see also Figure 3a and b):

[Simon had finished making the fajita filling, and Vanna says to him 'You can set the table, I'll do it on the hob', meaning she can now take charge to finish the meal. He goes off to set the table. Vanna takes out the wraps, turns on the gas and using a tong starts grilling the wraps directly on fire. It was done within two minutes. While she was doing this, Simon was sitting at the dinner table, mumbling to himself.]

Vanna: This way is faster than putting in the oven and in the microwave it gets soggy. I mean if you do roti on the pan, it's the same thing [..] I used to do this [way] in the past, and it's so fast. And I like the flavour, when it gets a bit burnt [..] Yeah, people find it dangerous, but this way I've seen it so much. When I did it the first time, Simon was like, what are you doing? It's burning! It's not burning, it's fine.

Simon: I mean if I see you putting fire to the house – [he exclaims from the dining table]

Vanna: I'm not putting fire to the house.

Simon: You are crazy

Vanna: How is this different to putting something in the wood oven? Or cooking on the fire?

The idealised project of cooking together, which is a practice that both see as central for the making of coupledom (see Marshall and Anderson, 2002), clashes with the realisation of incompatible dormant and then active dispositions around cooking and storing techniques. Similar to table manners, cooking techniques are an embodiment of cultural

Figure 3. (a, b) Vanna grilling the wrap.

dispositions and acquired from socialising with a particular culture, as this couple exemplifies (Visser, 1993; Wilk, 2006). Health risk from charring foods is contextual and cultural as demonstrated in this exchange: fire is seen as something to avoid according to Simon's active dispositions, while it is normalised and praised by Vanna. This conflictual moment reveals an affective scenario in which clashes of dispositions activate strong negative emotional responses of anger and frustration in both parties. Cultural differences, probably never discussed prior to sharing the practice of cooking or storing, are activated through the materiality of the meals and discussed upon in a moment that is emotionally loaded. Vanna and Simon did not solve their differences and ended their relationship after two years of cohabitation.

Discussion

The analysis of conflictual moments provides a novel way of looking at coupledom in the making as it reveals how conflicts are at play and their significance for the relationship. Sharing meals remains central for the daily life of the couples (Bove and Sobal, 2006; Kemmer et al., 1998; Marshall and Anderson, 2002), as participants see it as a pivotal practice for the making of coupledom. Couples' aspirations and idealised accounts of sharing foodwork align with the notion of pure relationship with an emphasis on mutual respect and equality (Giddens, 1991) and a pragmatic view on doing family (Morgan, 2011). Yet, observations reveal how such aspirations of sharing foodwork are not fulfilled in the everyday life; conflicts and then negotiations and compromises around practical arrangements and division of labour do not emerge from simple and rationalised calculations but emerge from more nuanced and complex structural inequalities that permeate domestic life. Our analysis of conflictual moments provides a less positive understanding of the daily quarrels of newly formed couples. If previous works acknowledge contrasting dispositions and habits in couple relationships, they also provide an optimistic account of how conflicts get resolved over time (Bove at al., 2003; Darmon and Warde, 2016, 2019) and become pivotal for the formation of coupledom (Kaufmann, 1994, 2010). Through retrospective accounts, these works focus on couple negotiations of previous conflicts and their establishment of a present shared routine.

Inspired by a moments approach (Gabb and Fink, 2015), we studied conflicts not simply as emerging from participants' accounts but from ethnographic observations in which the material aspects of the meal as well as its meanings and emotions are taken into consideration. Rather than asking couples to identify and reflect on their conflictual moments (Gabb and Fink, 2015), we observed these moments in situ, revealing broader structural and socio-cultural inequalities of family life. In doing so, our article contributes to existing literature in two ways.

First, we show how conflictual moments emerge as clashes between individuals' dispositions, which are reflected upon. If previous studies looked at reflexivity in major critical events (Giddens, 1991; Thomson et al., 2002), this research shows how reflexivity is at play in mundane moments through a process of zooming in and zooming out. Through zooming in, individuals make sense of their dormant dispositions and reflect upon the matter of the conflict referring to their previous knowledge and understanding. Dormant dispositions emerged from the mundane, taken-for-granted and material aspects

of foodwork and are related to responsibilities (who does what), standards (what is appropriate) and techniques (how things are done): for example, the case of Vanna and Simon and how they discuss the different techniques of sealing packages bringing their cultural understanding of propriety and health. Zooming in is usually followed by zooming out, when the matter of the dispute is framed by participants around their active dispositions on broader understanding of family life that go beyond making dinner. Through zooming out, couples reflect on their conflicting dormant dispositions, linking them to broader understanding of family life including gendered roles, classed sensitivities around propriety and cultural differences. Participants reflexively position themselves and justify their dispositions by referring to their gendered, classed and cultural understandings, ideals and beliefs. In this part of the conflict, the materiality of the meal is used to reflect upon broader aspects of family life and the structural inequalities that accompany it. In analysing the process of zooming out, we could clearly observe the resurgence of the individual self within the process of doing coupledom. For instance, Nick and Sara's discussion on the responsibility of making dinner reveals the cultural resources that are deployed to reflect upon the inequal distribution of domestic labour in their home. Sara, on different occasions, explains her dispositions drawing upon her own classed, ethnic and gendered dispositions, while Nick refers to evolutionary psychology and his working schedule. If feminist scholars have explored the emotional burden of foodwork on women, they have mainly focused on individual perspectives (Devault, 1997; Parsons et al., 2024). Studying conflictual moments allowed us to understand how inequalities are justified and reflected upon by both parties. Despite Sara and Nick's clear mismatch of dispositions and consequent unequal domestic labour, the couple remained together for a long time, showing that negotiations are complex and do not reflect simple calculative transactions.

Second, in unpacking this process, we provide an in-depth understanding of conflictual moments that arise from gendered, classed and cultural dispositions. Previous research on foodwork and foodcare (Parsons et al., 2024) highlights how gendered inequalities are mainly due to the unequal division of domestic labour, as women do carry the material and emotional responsibility of feeding others. Our study extends this body of work showing how domestic inequality is not only about gendered responsibilities (who does what) but also about classed standards (what is appropriate) and culturally normalised techniques (how things are done). This does not mean that gender is not a major structural axis of domestic inequality, but it means that there are other overlooked axes that need to be recognised to fully grasp the dynamics of labour in domestic life. It is through the examination of conflicts as epistemic and emotional scenarios that we could grasp how biographical dispositions intersect with not one but multiple layers of socio-cultural structures, including gendered roles, classed sensibilities and cultural understanding of propriety. Julia and William provide evidence of the complexity of power dynamics around the axes of gender and social class. As their conflictual moments unfold, it emerges how the making of coupledom results from conflicts and compromises around inequalities that cannot be simply reduced to one structural element. William's frustrations about Julia's standards in cooking, shopping and cleaning, are not just related to their different class-based proprieties but also deeper expectations about masculinity and femininity. If previous critiques of Giddens' notion of pure relationship were mainly about gendered inequalities

(Cappellini et al., 2014; Jamieson, 1999) and women's power struggle (Björnberg, 2004; Christopher, 2021), this study illustrates the complexity of domestic inequalities that emerge from more than one identarian axis. Conflictual moments can reveal the intersecting inequalities in domestic life, where power dynamics and structural inequalities intersect with wider social relations and norms around femininity and masculinity, middle-class and working-class sensibilities, and cultural dispositions.

Conclusion

In this article we introduce the notion of conflictual moments to investigate how conflicts emerge and evolve among newly cohabiting couples. In taking a moments approach, we show that everyday meal practices are imbued with inequalities in gender, class and cultural differences. Our study offers important policy implications in revealing the multifaceted and persistent inequalities of domestic life, which are based on patriarchal views but also cultural and classed normalising and moralising ideals of family life. By examining conflictual moments in the context of mundane family meals, policy makers can recognise the wider structural and socio-cultural tensions inherent in the unvalued caring work of feeding the family. We call for further research to advance our understanding of how conflictual moments are embedded in family life. Future studies could analyse other practices that couples co-engage in, which might reveal other sets of dispositions and inequalities. As this research focuses on young heterosexual cohabited couples, additional studies could focus on other groups, for example older, queer or homosexual cohabiting couples, in which other forms of inequalities might be at play. Finally, the roles of other family members, including children and grandparents, could also be considered as they might provide a different perspective on conflicts and inequalities at home.

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Ethics Statement

Ethical approval was obtained from the review board of Royal Holloway University of London prior to commencing the study. All participants provided informed consent and were informed of their right to withdraw from the research at any time. Identifying information, such as names and specific locations, has been anonymised to ensure confidentiality.

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