**Note**: This paper has been accepted in  *Families, Relationships and Societies* *.* The version below may differ slightly from the published version, which should be regarded as definitive.

**Boxed up? Lunchboxes and expansive mothering outside home**

**Vicki Harman and Benedetta Cappellini**

**Abstract**

This paper unpacks the experiences of 30 British women making lunchboxes for their children, and their opposition to opting for school dinners. Findings emerging from photo-elicitation interviews and focus group discussions show how mothers consider themselves the only actor able to make a 'proper lunchbox'. School dinners are considered a risky option for their children and father's interference in preparing lunchboxes is viewed with suspicion. The paper shows how lunchboxes can be viewed as an expansion of intensive mothering: a way of making home away from home, stretching the intensive domestic care used for toddlers to school aged children. Expansive mothering is characterised by mothers' mediating role which places them between the child and the outside world. This role is mainly performed as a risk management activity aimed at recreating the domestic security outside the home, yet it also reinforces the message that feeding children is a mother's domain.

**Introduction**

The recent introduction of universal school dinners for children aged 4-7 in England (Section 106 of the Children and Families Act 2014) and the consequent policies adopted by some schools banning packed lunches caused fervent debates and polarised reactions amongst parents, schools and public health groups. For example, on September 11th 2014 *The Mail Online* reported several cases of parents removing children from school where a lunchboxes ban was introduced. Although such stories often adopt the gender neutral term of parents, these stories highlight how mothers are at the front of a dispute about healthy eating and control over children’s diets. The main argument used by such mothers is that they know how to feed their children better than others. Why do women seek to reclaim their ‘right’ to feed their children in school? Why do they do so when they are already juggling so many domestic and work tasks? Why do such mothers seek to make more work for themselves? Starting from these questions, this paper aims to understand why the mothers in our sample express a preference for making lunchboxes for their children rather than opting for school dinners and why some defend this mundane task so fiercely when experts seek to reclaim it. In answering these empirical questions, this paper engages with broader theoretical work on intensive mothering and feeding children outside the home.

The literature on children’s lunchboxes highlight how women feel judged as ‘good’ or ‘bad’ mothers depending on the content of and responses to their lunchboxes (Allison 1991, Harman and Cappellini, 2015). As we have highlighted elsewhere, the food provided in lunchboxes is prepared at home but displayed and consumed at school, others actors, including the teachers, other children and other mothers, need to be satisfied (Harman and Cappellini, 2015). Others have shown how mothers spend a vast amount of time preparing a lunch combining school regulations of ‘proper eating’ as well as domestic norms of a ‘proper meal’ (Donner 2006, Morrison 1996). From the existing literature we understand that the experience of making lunchboxes is characterised by anxiety and uncertainties since this performance of mothering can be scrutinised by different actors outside the home. Given that making lunchboxes is seen as a source of anxiety and stress, we are left with little understanding of why more mothers do not delegate such a task to others.

In this paper we analyse the experiences of 30 mothers making packed lunches for their children as they emerged from photo-elicitation interviews and focus group discussions. Empirical findings show this mundane and taken-for-granted practice of preparing lunchboxes is experienced as an intensive mothering practice materialising the unshakable mothering ideal of putting children’s needs first (McCarthy, Edwards and Gillies 2000). These findings have theoretical implications contributing to the current debates on intensive mothering. If the debate on intensive mothering is focussed mainly on domestic practices (Faircloth 2014), this study shows how intensive mothering is expanded in time and space when the child is no longer a toddler but a school aged child outside home. Such an expansion in time and space modifies intensive mothering, and, we argue, transforms it into *expansive mothering*. Expansive mothering is characterised by mothers’ mediating role which places them between the child and the outside world. Also, mothers’ monopolised expansion of risk management and increased mistrust and control also have implications for the unequal division of domestic labour. Expansive mothers are not simply victims of an unequal distribution of power and labour, but there are actively implicated in maintaining and defending the *status quo*.

**Intensive mothering**

Theoretically, this paper draws on ideas of intensive mothering (Douglas and Michaels 2005, Faircloth 2014, Faircloth and Murray 2015, Hays 1996). The literature argues that the work of parents in general (and mothers in particular) has been heightened with increased time energy and resources being ploughed into each child (Faircloth 2014, Hays 1996). A commonly accepted definition of intensive parenting is provided by Hays (1996) highlighting how ‘good childrearing requires the day-to-day labour of nurturing the child, listening to the child, attempting to decipher the child’s needs and desires, struggling to meet the child’s wishes, and placing the child’s well-being ahead of their [mothers’] own convenience.’ Following Hays (1996), who studied mothers with children aged 2-4 years old, intensive parenting can be performed through methods that are ‘child-centred, expert-guided, emotionally absorbing, labour intensive, and financially expensive’ (Hays 1996: 8). Although intensive parenting affects both mothers and fathers, women have been impacted more significantly by this pervasive ideal of good parenting (Doucet 2007, Fox 2009, Hoffman 2010, Wetherell 1997).

In reviewing the existing studies in this area, intensive mothering emerges as a pervasive ideal of motherhood characterised by two main aspects. Firstly, the future success, happiness and well-being of the child depend on the intensity of the mother’s work. Thus mothering is a labour intense and emotionally demanding activity that needs to be learnt through advice from experts. Secondly, the child is seen as priceless and innocent but corruptible and vulnerable, thus at risk.

Lee argues that ‘‘parenting’ is now viewed as an activity that cannot be carried out ‘naturally’. ‘(Good) parenting’ is, in contrast, considered to be a form of learned interaction, widely discussed as a ‘skill set’’ (Lee 2014:8). Furthermore, people other than parents have special insights that can be brought to bear, with parenting experts and scientific research particularly venerated (Lee 2014:8). It can be argued that this increased intensification of parenting and the expert-driven nature of the phenomenon has undermined parents’ (and particularly mothers’) confidence whilst giving them extra responsibility through a mantra of parental determinism. As Lee explains:

*In sum, the message to mothers (and also fathers) is that the health, welfare and success (or lack of it) of their children can be directly attributed to the decisions they make about matters like feeding their children; ‘parenting’, parents are told, is both the hardest and most important job in the world. Tomorrow depends on it* (2014:2).

Hays (1996) is careful to stress that this intensification of parenting is a relatively recent historical development: ‘The idea the correct child rearing requires not only large quantities of money but also professional-level skills and copious amounts of physical, moral, mental and emotional energy on behalf of the individual mother is a relatively recent phenomenon’ (Hays 1996:4). A related term which has been used in studies involving older children is that of ‘concerted cultivation’ (Lareau, 2003; Vincent et al., 2013), which emphasises the classed role of extra-curricular activities in a future-orientated approach to parenting. Lareau’s (2003) intensive fieldwork with American families with children aged 9-10 drew attention to this style of parenting among middle class families in her sample. This involved parents actively assessing and fostering children’s talents, opinions and skills though enrolling children in multiple adult-structured leisure activities. Parents were also found to make active interventions on their children’s behalf, particularly in areas such as schooling and extra-curricular activities, which resulted in children having a sense that institutional provisions would be tailored to meet their individual needs.

Overall, the picture that parenting has intensified has implications not only for parents, but for the way that childhood and appropriate childcare are conceived of. Furedi (2008) argues that intensive parenting has the effect of rendering children as ‘pathetic vulnerable beings’ (15). Eleff and Trethewey (2006) highlight how such ideologies lead to an unrealistic view of childhood because it suggests an entitlement to a perfect childhood and implies that any kind of disappointment should be avoided. This view of children as pure, innocent and priceless also places them beyond market value (Zelizer 1994; Hays 1996) so that the work that goes into them should not be costed; it is performed as a result of the emotional intensity of mother’s feelings – in short, love. This implies a constant attention to how to satisfy the child’s desires and how to protect her/him from unknown and unpredictable risks.

The avoidance of risk is a crucial aspect of the so called paranoid parenting (Furedi 2008: 15). Given that risk is now understood as ‘the worst case scenario, a possibility rather than a probability’, risk consciousness becomes a pervasive aspect of intensive mothering (Lee 2014:11). Managing risks is thus a way of mothering performed through a constant monitoring of the child and an anxious avoidance of untoward possibilities. In Hays’ (1996:65-6) analysis avoiding risk is mainly understood as avoiding contacts with the ‘potentially cold and cruel outside world’ by creating a domestic haven wherein the child is protected, reassured and defended against the ‘impersonal pecuniary relations that dominate outside’. For Furedi (2008) such unfocussed and generalised understanding of risk has generated an overall anxiety to be placated only through a constant monitoring of the child. From these works, intensive mothering emerges as an activity of managing risks (Lee, Bristow, Faircloth and Macvarish 2014), translating external experts’ advice and recommendations and applying them to the domestic sphere. In the area of food, one of the risks to be avoided is that of obesity (Dimbleby and Vincent 2013). In light of concerns and pressures around eating nutritionally ‘correct’ food, packed lunches have received particular scrutiny from Government policy makers, public health groups, celebrities and schools. However, mothers’ voices have rarely been explored in a meaningful way in media debates on packed lunches (Pike and Leahy 2012).

**Research Methods**

This paper focuses on photo-elicitation interviews with thirty mothers interviewed between January 2013 and July 2014 plus three focus groups drawn from the same group of participants. Research participants were recruited via a letter sent out by schools to all parents with children aged 9-11 at their school. The fieldwork took place in Surrey and West London, England. Parents with children aged between nine and eleven years old were targeted since children at this stage have well established food preferences and can negotiate their choices with adults (Roberts and Pettigrew 2013). The recruitment material used the gender neutral language ‘parents’, however, it is significant to note that there was only one male volunteer for the study. Given the focus of the paper on mothering, the experience of the father was not used in this article.

A demographic questionnaire completed by each participant indicated that mothers in the sample were aged between 27 to 50. Apart from two lone mothers, they were all married and living with their husbands. Of the sample, 22 mothers were in paid employment, either full or part time. The sample consisted of 26 white British mothers and 1 black British mother, 1 Croatian and 2 Indian mothers. Using an index taking into account income, home ownership and lifestyle patterns, 19 mothers in the sample were classified as middle class and 11 mothers were classified as working class.

Participants were interviewed twice. The first interview provided an introduction to each family, how food was organised within the household, responsibility for meals and shopping including preparing lunchboxes, how the lunchbox content was decided, and guidance given from the school and other sources. Parents were then asked to take photographs of lunchboxes prepared during one week. The second interview (which took place approximately three weeks after the first) asked parents to discuss the photographs taken and provided an opportunity to follow up questions emerging from the first interview. The authors recognise that through the practice of inviting the research participants to take the photographs for research purposes they may have felt the need to demonstrate ‘good parenting’ by including certain items and excluding others. We tried to limit this as far as possible by emphasising to the participants that the researchers are not nutritionists, rather we are interested in parents’ own views, experiences and practices.

The three focus groups enabled participants to discuss lunchboxes in a group setting, facilitating the interactions between mothers with different experiences, ideas and understandings. Here, parents were shown photographs of lunchboxes found online and in other research studies along with a recent newspaper article as a stimulus for discussion. The first focus group was attended by 7 participants, the second was attended by 5 participants and the third by 7 participants. Interviews and focus group data were transcribed verbatim. A thematic data analysis began after the first interview and was ongoing. For the purpose of this paper, the transcripts were revisited and coded with particular attention to the manifestation of intensive mothering.

**One like many: school dinners and the risk of standardised meals**

Among our sample, opting for the school dinners was presented as a matter of choosing a risky option for children. Risks are presented in terms of the possibility rather than the probability (Furedi 2008, Lee 2014) of the child being disappointed with the meal. Amongst the risks emerging in the narrative presented by participants, it emerges that the school meals are not considered appropriate in terms of quantity and quality of the food, but also in terms of the ways they are served. Firstly, the meal is not configured as a good combination of items.

*I see cake and custard too often on the menu, I see pizza. It’s better than it was. […] I think they believe that they’re being healthy, but it’s not healthy enough for me. Cake and custard is on there too much. I don’t actually believe that children need pudding every day* (Gemma)

Gemma appears confident in judging the menu based on her own dietary criteria of what constitutes a healthy meal. Such a critical view seems to be at odds with the literature highlighting the unconditional faith that mothers place on experts (Faircloth 2014, Lee 2014). Here we see mothers criticising the experts’ provision of food arguing that what is served is inadequate for children’s needs. Expressions such as ‘not enough’, ‘too much’ were very common in mothers’ descriptions of the food menu, suggesting that in mothers’ eyes, the school provision does not match home standards of feeding children. The majority of our participants thought that the portions of the food are too small for their children. Involved in after school activities (swimming lessons, after school clubs, sports clubs) children are, according to mothers, in need of more food than that provided by the school. There were also concerns about children’s preferences not being met:

*There are some things on the school menu that the kids really don't like. So what are they going to eat then? Or how much will they eat? Or they'd probably only eat the dessert, things like that […] I know especially for my son, some of the meals haven’t been exactly what I’d like them to have. Sometimes my daughter has complained that she hasn’t got the dessert, and it’s a bit disconcerting because I know I’ve paid for it so they are kind of looking forward to the dessert too, so it’s a bit unfair […]They have second sitting or first sitting, she’s been second sitting, she hasn’t got her dessert. Or if they have lasagne and garlic bread, she hasn’t got the garlic bread.* (Priya)

‘Enough’ seems to be a key term here, highlighting the perceived deficiencies of the school in accommodating children requests. Lack of choice, adherence to strict budgets, time available for eating and abilities to accommodate the requests of individual children seem to be seen as a risk for these mothers. Treated as one of many, children having school dinners face the challenge of sharing their meals with others and thus coping with long queues, the disappointment of not having their favourite dish and their dessert. This suggests that from the perspective of the mothers in our sample, the school does not treat the child as a special one, beyond market value (Hays 1996), but it relates to her/him as a customer from an undistinguished mass. The consequent possibilities of children being disappointed by the relatively reduced choices, feeling hungry and spending too much of their play time queuing is in open contrast with the constant attention and risk avoidance of intensive mothering. Losing control of children’s diets was therefore found to be a source of worry for the mothers in the sample. As Katherine explained:

*I think that* [eating enough food] *was one of the concerns when he had, like, these school meals for a little while, because that was out of my control. And when he was telling me that he was leaving such and such, and I was a bit like ‘Oh, crumbs, so what exactly did you have to eat then, David?’ ‘cause he was coming home, I’d say half the time, starving. […] So yeah, to not know exactly what your child’s eating is a bit of a worry, whilst at least I can exactly see what he has eaten, what he hasn’t eaten, what he’s drank.*

Being unable to predict and solve the possible obstacles faced during the school dinner is in contrast with the intensive mothering ideal wherein mothers are called to anticipate and indeed remove the possible obstacles of the ‘cruel outside world’ (Hays 1996: 65). This is indeed a risk as it threatens one of the central aspects of the intensive mothering –retaining the monopoly on managing the child’s care (Christopher 2012). In this way, being an irreplaceable carer for the child can be seen as a pillar of mothers’ identity; one that is partly demonstrated through food work (De Vault 1991).

**Other actors preparing lunchboxes: Dads and children within mothers’ narratives**

If the cruel outside world is seen as inadequate to take care of the priceless child (Hays 1996), our findings also show how other actors in the home –namely fathers and children- were also positioned as less competent than mothers themselves. This is in tune with previous studies highlighting how the overall management of domestic tasks – with its related responsibilities and anxieties - remain a woman’s domain, while the male partner’s role is limited to the execution of some of these tasks (Beagan, Chapman, D'Sylva and Bassett 2008, De Vault 1991). Existing studies have documented that although discourses around fathering have changed (Dermott and Miller 2015) and many fathers express the desire to be more actively engaged in children’s lives than in previous generations, there are still areas where increased involvement could be realised (Miller 2011; Dermott and Miller 2015). What is new and interesting here is the overall justification that the mothers in our sample provide for such an unequal distribution of domestic labour and the way in which they seem invested in perpetuating the status quo. The following exchange illuminates some of the justifications in circulation:

Tina: *I just think men are a bit disorganised in the morning. My husband is – because I like to do it in the morning, I don’t do it the night before, and it just wouldn’t happen. Actually, there were a couple of days when I was away, and what he did, he went to Tesco – you know those ready-made little lunch things with all those crackers – and he did. I couldn’t believe it. I saw the evidence when I came back. He was just like, ‘Well, what do you do?’ Helen won’t eat sandwiches. She doesn’t like sandwiches, so it’s all pasta and rice salads and she likes chopped up vegetables and salami, and because he knows that, he said he didn’t know what to do. I said, ‘Have you not seen me every morning chopping up things? Doing the pasta and everything?’ But he wasn’t that organised, I suppose.*

Priya: *I think for me also, I would be worried. Does he know what they like, does he give them too much, will he give them too little? So for me it’s also a confidence thing; I know what they have, I know what they like.*

Helena: *Yes, you want to do things yourself. I would have to do everything. I wouldn’t trust….* (Focus group 1)

This exchange is interesting because it seems to invoke the idea that there are ‘natural’ differences in the skills and dispositions of men and women – with organisation, effort and attention to detail being part of this and it is implied that these fall ‘naturally’ into the repertoire of women (see also Aarseth and Olsen 2008, Beagan et al. 2008, Riley and Kiger, 1999). Mothers’ ‘special knowledge’ of their children’s likes and dislikes was presented as an important resource to be utilised for children’s benefit. Perceived as lacking this intimate and sometimes changing knowledge of their children’s food, fathers were presented as less able to do the task of lunchbox preparation. Furthermore, in trying to ‘cut corners’, the nature of the father’s consumption is seen as problematic, with the phrase ‘those ready-made little lunch things’ suggesting that there is not enough intensive labour and home preparation to be seen as ‘good parenting’. The lack of mediation between the market and the food consumed by the child is seen as an inadequate form of caring in contrast with the intensity of the mediating practices operated by mothers (Hays 1996; Moisio, Arnould and Price 2004). As we will see later, customising mass produced items is seen as a quintessential aspect of intensive mothering outside the home. Finally the language of ‘evidence’ suggests a lack of trust and the need for investigation and constant reassurances that the delegated tasks are performed intensively.

If fathers are seen as actors that cannot be trusted, children are usually excluded from the preparation of lunchboxes. Although they may be consulted during shopping trips and before assembling the various items which will make up the lunch, children are not generally involved in its preparation. However, they can be involved in extraordinary cases, when, for example, mothers are not at home. As Kirsty said:

*If I'm not around, she does her own, rather than Dad does it, because Dad can’t be bothered to do packed lunches, because they're a faff. (Kirsty)*

The term ‘faff’ - used to denote time spent on an ineffectual activity – is revealing here, as it reaffirms how fathers are in a position of selecting the household’s tasks they want to perform and of opting out from less desirable ones (Fox 2009; Dermott and Miller 2015). When children were asked to make their lunchboxes, they were usually asked to assemble items previously selected by the mother. As such their involvement was not generally in deciding what items to put in the box, but simply replicating a consolidated structure of the meal. This is indeed the case of Jane, a working class mother who is the only participant asking her children to prepare their lunchboxes ‘*quite often*’, as she said.

*They know what they’re allowed and what they’re not. It just depends whether I’ve done it the night before, or, if I’ve got up late. It just depends what’s going on. If I’ve slept through my alarm and I hadn’t the night before, then they would definitely do it. They know they have to have a piece of fruit in it. They always have a pure orange juice and things like that in it. Yes, most of the ones through the week, it was kind of half and half between me and my son (Jane)*

In Jane’s household her elder child shares with her the responsibility of making lunchboxes for himself and his young brother. Having stored all the items for the lunchboxes in a section of the fridge, Jane retains the overall responsibility of deciding the content of their children lunchbox, but she delegates to her child the chore and responsibility of preparing them in themorning. Jane’s division of labour with her son is very interesting as it confirms the literature highlighting how working class children are more autonomous in their daily food consumption (Wills et al. 2011). Elsewhere we have unpacked these classed differences, but here it is noteworthy to point out how Jane’s narrative is in contrast with the narratives of the majority of the other participants who, in line with the intensive mothering ideal, see their children as unsuitable actors for these type of domestic chores (Zelizer, 1994). As fathers and children are relegated as dependent actors to be supervised, the mothers in our sample appear to imply that they are the only competent actor in their household able to plan and execute the task of making lunchboxes. The positioning of mothers as the most suitable actors for this task will now be examined in more detail.

**The proper lunchboxes: the maternal touch outside the home**

Providing food that satisfies the children is nothing new in the literature. For example, De Vault (1991) highlighted how mothers do not simply cook but provide meals accommodating the requests of family members. Satisfying such requests seems to be particularly challenging when food is consumed outside home, wherein adjustments cannot be made to the packed lunch, and the school dictates regulations of what cannot be included in the lunchboxes. If elsewhere we have highlighted how mothers negotiate the challenging requests provided by the school (Cappellini and Harman, forthcoming), here we want to concentrate on the risk of disappointment and leaving the child without a pleasant and satisfying lunch, which appears to be one of the main preoccupation of the participants. The accomplishment of a proper lunchbox is achieved mainly through two main strategies: listening to the children’s requests and keeping updated with the marketplace’s recommendations.

Take for example Adele, a recently separated woman in her thirties who has 2 daughters with different tastes and rapidly changing preferences. Having agreed on the content of the lunchbox the night before, Adele prepares the packed lunches in less than 10 minutes at 5 in the morning before getting ready to go to work. She described this as a routinized practice that she does ‘without thinking’.

*The wraps, obviously they’re into that at the moment. Different types of fruit. Rita loves her crisps but certain crisps. Then Peperami and a Mini Roll that day. Obviously Sarah has yoghurt rather than the Peperami. This week, as I said, they’ve changed to chicken which I was quite surprised about. It’s the southern fried chicken so they quite like that, which they were constantly having a good few last year and they went off it. They just re-asked for it again so I’m like, ‘Okay’. […] They’ve got bored of their cakes now. I think Sarah’s gone into a couple of little biscuits and Rita has gone for – she found in, was it Tesco or Asda? I can’t remember – the iced ring things. […] It’s just varied. I vary, as I said, the fruit every day just so they get a different balance.*

Making lunchboxes is far from being an activity to be done in few minutes, since it requires a careful work of planning, shopping for different products and brands and assembling them into lunchboxes which change over time. Taking into consideration and remembering children’s changing requests and balancing them with Adele’s own idea of a proper lunch (varied and balanced) requires ‘thinking’ and effort which goes beyond the 10 minutes spent in the kitchen in the morning. However Adele, as with the majority of our participants, disregards that making a packed lunch is a time consuming practice, stressing the effortlessness of the moment of assembly. Confirming previous works on feeding the family (Bugge and **Almås 2006,** De Vault 1991, Molander 2011), participants talk about the routinized practices of feeding children in an unreflective manner, as if they were part of their mothering work and ‘simply there’ to be done. As eloquently put by Jasmine *‘*as a mother, that is my job’*.*

This job is particularly demanding when the child’s requests change rapidly and children’s emotional response to their meals is one of the mothers’ preoccupations. Some participants seek advice from experts in the attempt to solve the dilemma of feeding a ‘fussy’ child. This is the case of Priya who refers to experts not simply for advice on what to put in the lunchbox but also how to present the combination of items. In commenting on her children’s lunchboxes (see figure 1) she explains:

*I was researching bento boxes because as I said my son’s quite a fussy eater, so I was looking for things to make him like to eat. I had looked up these and since I blog, a lot of the bloggers are into - and they do some extremely good stuff, I don't know where they find the time sometimes in the morning. They theme the entire lunchbox and things like that, so I said let me start small and bought these. I’ve got a star shape, a heart shape, the nice thing about it is I can make it and keep it, even the previous day or the previous evening and then just put it into the box in the mornings.*

INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE

We see from Priya’s example that lunchbox contents can be crafted in an out of the ordinary way in order to add excitement and interest, as a new form of satisfaction that does not simply relate to the food, but its aesthetic qualities. Indeed satisfaction here takes a different meaning than the previously suggested by the literature (see De Vault 1991) as it is a matter of providing food that entertains the children during the lunch break (Harman and Cappellini 2014). Being informed by ‘experts’ (mummy bloggers), Priya finds this intensified labour of searching, planning and experimenting with new products a very satisfying one. Indeed she talks with pride about her accomplished lunchbox and the excitement that generates for her son as well as his school mates.

Mothers’ efforts to accommodate children’s changing requests, enhanced with the ‘help’ of advice available in the marketplace (bloggers as the case of Priya, but also celebrities and ‘experts’ in the case of other participants) appears to be a never ending project consuming time, money and labour (Moisio et al. 2004). Given this intense emotional commitment it is not surprising that these women consider themselves the best actor able to feed their children. Lunchboxes can be seen as objectifying the intensity of their mothering, as well as materialising their in-depth and up-to-date knowledge of their children’s nutritional and emotional needs.

**Boxed up: expansive mothering, risk avoidance and craft-consumption**

This paper sought to understand mothers’ motivation behind making lunchboxes for children and, amongst our sample, their firm refusal for opting for school meals. Going beyond a mere discourse of healthy eating, these findings highlight how lunchboxes can be understood as a technology of intensive mothering practiced outside the home. The paper shows how making lunchboxes is an expansion of the intensity of mothering: a way of making home away from home. *Expansive mothering* is what we refer to as this spatial and temporal extension of intensive mothering.

Expansive mothering is mainly a practice of mediation between the child and the rest of the world. As the literature highlights, in the case of babies and toddlers, mothers tend to have the control of the child since they interact directly with him/her or they tend to manage others (for example nannies, fathers, grandparents) providing detailed instructions on how to take care of the child (Christopher 2012). In case of school aged children, the child interacts directly with adults (including lunchtime staff and teachers) while mothers may be excluded from such interactions. The expansive mothering role then becomes one of mediating: judging, filtering, selecting, applying or rejecting the recommendations of various external experts (from lunchtime staff to celebrity chefs, from bloggers to nutritionists) and applying them outside the home. Indeed mothers’ work is to reincorporate external advice, taming and applying them in the outside world wherein the child is left on her/his own dealing directly with adults.

The role of mediating is mainly a way of managing risk, as the ‘worst case scenarios’ (Lee 2014:11) faced by a child who is still defined in infantilising terms as someone who is vulnerable and unable to feed her/himself. Risks are part of the everyday life of the innocent child (Furedi 2008, Hoffman 2010) and consequentially mothering is a risk management activity to be practiced at a distance. The outside environment (in our case the school) is not a reassuring one, since it is itself a source of possible risks and disappointments that need to be predicted and solved by mothers (rather than by the child). Predicting and eluding risks is practised through an intensified and never ending consumption activity of selecting products and brands and assembling them in the attempt to satisfy the anticipated desires of the child.

Surprisingly, participants are unreflective about their mediating role, which is labour intensive and time consuming, as they consider it as part of their mothering work. However, they are very aware of its importance. In fact, when fathers fail to accomplish such a role, it becomes evident that craft consumption cannot be improvised. Among our sample, fathers were generally seen as actors to monitor and distrust since their parenting was considered inadequate to reach the standards of intensive mothering. Mothers’ knowledge of the children’s preference, desires and possible challenges is so embedded in these women’s accounts of their everyday lives that it is not surprising to realise that when fathers are occasionally parachuted into the kitchen, they are unable to replicate this intensified and well-crafted consumption. Fathers, who in our sample were reported to rely heavily on the market to make lunchboxes, are considered incapable of achieving a ‘good’ lunchbox, since what they produce it is not a mediated and crafted assemblage of mass produced items and brands. Our findings also suggest that children were not generally seen as responsible for preparing their own lunchboxes, suggesting a type of intensive mothering where children are protected from domestic work (Zelizer, 1994).

The narratives of the sample presented here suggest that the monopolising position of mothers inside the home is also defended outside domestic walls. Despite much of the public discussion around children’s food blaming mothers for children’s poor diets (Pike and Leahy 2012), the data suggests a different picture where mothers are concerned about nutrition, such as whether children have enough to eat and the emotional response to the food provided. This suggests that when mothers are preparing lunchboxes they are doing so within a social and emotional context as well thinking about food intake and children’s activities across the whole day or week. In comparison media and government reports often transpose nutritional standards designed for school dinners onto packed lunches in a depersonalised way – the result is that only 1-1.6% are found to meet these stringent standards (Dimbleby and Vincent 2013; The Guardian 06.09.16). Within mothers’ narratives, it is school dinners rather than packed lunches that are described as the risky option (see Furedi 2008, Lee 2010) wherein control cannot be exercised since others have the full control of what and how the child eats. The very critical attitude towards the school, in the area of feeding children, is a surprising finding. The data considered here suggests that if intensive mothering is seen as an application of the advice and recommendations from undetermined ‘experts’ (Hays 1996, Lee 2014), expansive mothering consists of a more cynical attitude towards the school and a faithful attitude towards the marketplace’s advice. Indeed the so called inefficiency of the school dinners is described with a rhetoric of ‘value for money’ typical of the marketplace, wherein goods and services are judged on the mere criteria of customers’ satisfaction. This relates to a neoliberal subjectivity whereby parents act as entrepreneurial, self-sufficient actors, taking on responsibility for their child and not assuming that the state will do so (Holloway and Pimlott-Wilson, 2014). With particular reference to parenting classes, Holloway and Pimlott-Wilson (2014) draw our attention to the significance of local mothering cultures, and this could be explored further with regard to packed lunches. It is however notable that the pedagogical aspects of sharing a meal with peers, with the related aspects of considering also other people’s preferences and desires, is almost totally absent in mothers’ narratives.

There are some identifiable synergies between our findings and Lareau’s (2003) concept of ‘concerted cultivation’, but also some key differences. Like Lareau (2003), our study suggests that parents (mothers in particular) are carefully monitoring their children’s experiences, opinions and talents and they are making criticisms of the school’s provision. However, rather than seeking to get the school to adjust the service provided (e.g. reducing the frequency of desserts or ensuring all children receive the side dishes intended to accompany the meals), which would be a likely intervention in line with the practices documented among the middle class mothers in Lareau’s (2003) study, within our sample, the response following the criticism of the school’s provision was for mothers to retain or take on the task themselves. Where the strategy of concerted cultivation leads to an emerging sense of individualism and entitlement on the part of the child, we suggest that expansive mothering invokes individualism but a continued reliance on mothers (rather than institutions, or fathers) to meet their particular needs. Expansive mothering therefore differs from concerted cultivation as it is less about monitored delegation to other adults and is more about retaining the ‘doing’ of key tasks by mothers themselves.

The study suggested that while the mothers in our sample were often challenging the school food provision within their narratives, they often regarded marketplace experts highly. For example, blogs were seen as a resource to search, evaluate and potentially emulate. Similarly products in supermarkets were tried and evaluated; recommendations from celebrity chefs applied. Arguably, such sources do not threaten the ‘special relationship’ between mother and child. If school dinners can be interpreted as an attempt to remove mothers from the task of feeding the children, blogs and celebrity experts guiding mothers in making lunchboxes encourage them in their expansion of mothering, providing new ways of feeding their children outside the home. Such experts do not threaten the core idea of expansive mothering, since they reinforce the notion that feeding children is the mother’s domain and that in order to do it, women need to be up to date with marketplace trends.

If others (Shirani, Henwood and Coltart 2012) have highlighted how being in full control of the child is a source of anxiety and paranoia afflicting mothers more than fathers, here we want to add that our participants are actively implicated in maintaining this unbalanced distribution of tasks and the overall feeling of responsibility. In fact participants’ accounts of their restless work of predicting possible risks and disappointments clearly show what Wolf (2011: xv) highlighted few years ago, that ‘mothers are held responsible for matters well outside their control, and they are told in various ways that they must eliminate even minute, ultimately ineradicable, potential threats to their children’s well-being’. Having fully internalised the determinist logic that the future of their child depends on them, our participants held themselves accountable for various possible sources of disappointment for their children.

This logic in which our participants ‘box themselves up’ has also some benefits for mothers themselves. Within this idea of exclusive relations and a monopolizing identity, we also note the relevance of the idea of the child as a project wherein the child becomes a symbol of good parenting (Eleff and Tretheway 2006) and in our case, good mothering. Remaining in control of the child’s diet is a ways of reinforcing the identity of being a competent mother, a careful risk manager, an expert consumer, and as De Vault (1991) said, being a good woman (see also Hays 1996, Molander 2011). Having internalised the extensive mothering logic, mothers in our sample are active participants in this gendering of the lunchbox preparation, defending the structure and form of the *status quo* which could be argued to be effectively ‘boxing themselves in’ and ‘boxing others out’. Given that fathers and schools were presented as unable to perform the work in the same way as mothers, showing less organisational skills and ‘special knowledge’ of children’s likes and dislikes, this results in mothers retaining the responsibility for lunchboxes. If other actors are presented as less capable, their exclusion and mothers’ increased role becomes an obvious solution.

**Conclusion**

By foregrounding mothers’ voices we have drawn attention to some of the unintended consequences of recent changes to school food policies which have involved the promotion of school dinners. It is perhaps unsurprising that given the longstanding relationship between food, motherhood and family life (De Vault 1991) that at a time where parents are expected to be more intensively involved in their children’s lives (Hays 1996) a request to become less practically involved with food consumed at school is met with resistance. We have argued that in order to make sense of such mothers’ desire to keep ‘doing the lunchboxes’, lunchboxes need to be analysed as a form ‘expansive mothering’ – the extension in time and space of intensive mothering. This also relates to a desire to maintain the special relationship with the child by providing a customised packed lunch meeting their specific needs and preferences.

While giving voice to mothers’ perspectives, the data presented in this paper also adds to the existing literature on change and stagnation in gendered domestic labour. This paper has argued that rather than that rather than being victims within a structure of unequal domestic labour, mothers are implicated in maintaining and defending the status quo by positioning other actors including fathers as less capable of preparing lunchboxes than they themselves are. This functions to strengthen the notion of the special relationship between mothers and children. Yet, by doing this, mothers also put themselves in a position to be blamed if there is some failing. Given that there is an ongoing media concern about childhood obesity (Boero 2007) critical commentary is more likely to fall on mothers. We argue that at a time where parenting expectations are intensifying, the naturalisation of gender roles within mundane domestic labour is important to note and to counter – it is important to open the box and discuss its (dis)contents.

**References**

Aarseth, H, and Olsen, B, M, 2008, Food and masculinity in dual career couples, *Journal of*

*Gender Studies*, 17, 4, 277-87

Allison, A, 1991, Japanese mothers and obentos: the lunch-box as ideological state apparatus, *Anthropological Quarterly*, 64, 4, 195-208

Beagan, B, Chapman, G, E, D'Sylva, A, and Bassett, B, R, 2008, It's just easier for me to do it': Rationalizing the family division of foodwork, *Sociology*, 42, 4, 653-671

Boero, N, 2007, All the news that’s fat to print: the American ‘obesity epidemic’ and the media, *Qualitative Sociology*, 30, 41-60

Bugge B, **A,** and **Almås, R, 2006,** Domestic dinner: Representations and practices of a proper meal among young suburban mothers, *Journal of Consumer Culture,* 6, 2, 203-228

Children and Families Act (2014) Chapter 6, London, The Stationary Office. Available at: <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2014/6/contents/enacted> (last accessed 02/03/17)

Christopher, C,2012, Extensive mothering: Employed mothers’ constructions of the

good mother, *Gender and Society*,26, 1, 73-96

Dermott, E, and Miller, M, 2015, More than the sum of its parts? Contemporary fatherhood policy, practice and discourse, *Families, Relationships and Societies,* 4, 2, 183-195

De Vault, M, L, 1991, *Feeding the family: the social organisation of caring as gendered work*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press

Dimbleby, H. and Vincent, R. (2013) The School Food Plan

http://www.schoolfoodplan.com/wpcontent/uploads/2013/07/School\_Food\_Plan\_2013.pdf

Donner, H, 2006, Committed mothers and well-adjusted children: privatisation, early-years education and motherhood in Calcutta, *Modern Asian Studies*, 40, 2, 371-395

Doucet, A, 2007, *Do men mother?,* Toronto: University of Toronto Press

Douglas, S, and Michaels, M, 2005, *The mommy myth: The idealization of motherhood*

*and how it has undermined all women*, New York: Free Press

Eleff, L, R, and Trethewey, A, 2006, The enterprising parent, *Journal of the Association for Research on Marketing,* 8, 1, 2, 242-251

Faircloth, C, 2014, Intensive parenting and the expansion of parenting, in E. Lee, J. Bristow, C. Faircloth, and J. MacVarish, (eds) *Parenting culture studies*, Basingstoke: MacMillan

Faircloth, C, and Murray, M, 2015, Parenting: kinship, expertise, and anxiety, *Journal of Family,* 36, 9, 1115-1129

Fox, B,2009, *When couples become parents: The creation of gender in the transition to parenthood,* Toronto: University of Toronto Press

Furedi, F. 2008, *Paranoid parenting: Why ignoring the experts may be best for your*

*child*, London: Bloomsbury Academic

Hays, S, 1996 *The cultural contradictions of motherhood,* New Haven and London: Yale University Press

Harman, V, and Cappellini, B, 2015, Mothers on Display: Lunchboxes, Social Class and Moral Accountability, *Sociology*, 49, 4, 764-781

Harman, V, and Cappellini, B, 2014, Unpacking Fun Food and Children’s Leisure: Mothers’ Perspectives on Preparing Lunchboxes, *Young Consumers*, 15, 4, 312-322

Holloway, S, and Pimlott-Wilson, H, 2014, “Any advice is welcome isn’t it?”: neoliberal parenting education, local mothering cultures, and social class, Environment and Planning A, 46, 94-111

Hoffman, D, M, 2010, Risky investments: parenting and the production of the ‘resilient child’, *Health, Risk and Society*, 12, 4, 385–394

Lareau, A, 2003, *Unequal childhoods*, London: University of California Press

Lee, E, Bristow, J, Faircloth, C, and Macvarish, J, 2014, *Parenting culture studies*, Basingstoke: Palgrave

Lee, E, 2014 ‘Introduction’ in E. Lee, J. Bristow, C. Faircloth, and J. MacVarish, (eds) *Parenting culture studies,* Basingstoke: MacMillan

Mail Online 2014 Parents remove pupils over school's packed lunch ban: Children left with little choice thanks to Clegg's hot dinners rule<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2751950/Parents-children-school-banned-packed-lunches-canteen-expensive.html>

McCarthy, J, R, Edwards, R, and Gillies, V, 2000, Moral tales of the child and the adult: narratives of contemporary family lives under changing circumstances, *Sociology* 34, 4, 785-803

McVeigh, K, 2016, Kids’ school packed lunches still full of junk, research finds, *The Guardian,* 06.09.16

https://www.theguardian.com/society/2016/sep/06/kids-school-lunchboxes-junk-food-research-england

Miller, T, (2011) *Making sense of fatherhood: Gender, caring and work*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

Moisio, R, Arnould, E, J, and Price, L, 2004, Between mothers and markets: constructing

family identity through homemade food, *Journal of Consumer Culture*, 4, 3, 361-384

Molander S,2011,Food, love and meta-practices: A study of everyday dinner consumption among single mothers*, Research in Consumer Behaviour,* 13, 1, 77-90

Morrison, M, 1996, Sharing food at home and school: perspectives on commensality, *The Sociological Review*, 44, 4, 648-674

Pike, J and Leahy, D, 2012, School food and the pedagogies of parenting, *Australian Journal of Adult Learning,* 52, 3, 434-459.

Riley, P, J, and Kiger, G, 1999, Moral discourse on domestic labour: gender, power, and

identity in families, *The Social Science Journal*, 36, 3, 541-548

Roberts, M, and Pettigrew, S, 2013, Psychosocial influences on children’s food consumption, *Psychology and Marketing*, 30, 2, 103-120

Shirani, R, Henwood, K, and Coltart, C, 2012**,** Meeting the challenges of intensive parenting culture: gender, risk management and the moral parent, Sociology,46, 1, 25-40

Vincent, C, Rollock, N, Ball, S, and Gillborn, D, 2013, Raising middle-class Black children: Parenting priorities, actions and strategies, *Sociology*, 47, 3, 427-442

Wetherell, M, 1997, Social structure, ideology and family dynamics: the case of parenting in J. Muncie, M. Wetherell, M. Langan, R. Dallos and A. Cochrane (eds) *Understanding the family* (Second Edition). London: Sage

Wills, W., Backett-Milburn, K., Roberts, M., L., Lawton, J. 2011, The framing of social class distinctions through family food and eating practices, *Sociological Review*, 59, 4, 725-740

Wolf, J, B, 2011, *Is breast best? Taking on the breastfeeding experts and the new high stakes of motherhood*, New York University Press: New York

Zelizer, V, 1994, *Pricing the priceless child: The changing social value of children*, Princeton University Press, New Jersey.

**Figure 1**

