

# Foodwork and foodcare in hard times: Mothering, value, and values

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## Abstract

In this article, we analyze the foodwork of mothers when feeding their families on low and reduced incomes. By exploring their accounts of food shopping and household budgeting, we argue that foodwork is intrinsically linked to other areas of social life and dominant values associated with “good mothering.” Through a careful consideration of the contexts and relations in which foodwork is valued, embedded, and made meaningful, we draw two key conclusions. First, we find that mothers' foodwork is oriented towards avoiding devaluation and maintaining a level of respectability as opposed to accumulating cultural capital. Second, we introduce the concept of foodcare arguing that it potentially offers low income mothers an alternative to the logic of capital for their demonstration of self-worth.

## KEYWORDS

foodcare, foodwork, mothering, social class, value, values

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

This article contributes to this special issue on foodwork by advancing current definitions and understandings of unpaid foodwork in the domestic setting. According to Bove and Sobal foodwork:

*describes the material, mental and social labour involved in meals and snacks.[...] While foodwork includes a range of components, the tasks of meal planning, food shopping, and cooking represent three major areas of responsibility.*

(Bove & Sobal, 2006, pp. 70–71)

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Foodwork, in particular the work of feeding the family, is central to social reproduction, nurturing and sustaining individual bodies as well as playing a commensurate role in bringing the family together (Cappellini & Parsons, 2012; Morrison, 1996). In this respect, we focus on “the value of cooking and eating in relationships of care, responsiveness, and conviviality” (Lewis, 2016, p. 9). While foodwork is important socially in bringing individuals together, it is also important economically at the household level particularly in households where finances are constrained (Attree, 2005; Dowler, 1997; Dowler & Calvert, 1995). We are concerned to capture (and revalorize) both the economic and social/relational significance of this work both for the mothers engaging in it and the household members that benefit from it. In theorizing foodwork then we are careful not to characterize it *either* as a form of socially necessary oppressive labor or as a terrain of nurture and care. We attempt to chart the middle ground between the economic and the social, production and reproduction, the public and the private, through a careful consideration of the contexts and relations in which foodwork is valued, embedded and made meaningful. To do this, we foreground the need to explore value in relation to values, here we use Beverley Skeggs' conception of value and its intersections with selfhood and legitimation (Skeggs, 2011). Importantly through this work, we develop the concept of “foodcare” to help capture the non-commodifiable elements of foodwork.

In this article, we understand foodwork, and expectations around this from the self and others, as being influenced by social identities and social divisions. Drawing on the feminist literature on classed identity and the revaluation of domestic work (Davidoff, 1995; DeVault, 1991; Erickson, 2005; Oakley, 1974), we explore women's accounts of their everyday foodwork. While married couples seem to share some foodwork (Bove & Sobal, 2006), and some authors point to the growing involvement of men in this work (Aarseth & Olsen, 2008; Fox, 2009) it is still seen largely as a woman's domain particularly when there are children in the household (DeVault, 1991). Foodwork, and in particular food provisioning, also tends to reproduce social class differences. While higher earning families can use food shopping to create distinction, lower income families face different constraints (Banister et al., 2016; Beagan et al., 2016). Other axes of difference, namely race and ethnicity, while not an explicit focus of the study, are nonetheless important in understanding foodwork, influencing consumption choices (Pitcher, 2014) and being heavily connected to food and eating experiences across the lifecourse within and across different geographical locations (Flowers & Swan, 2012). Indeed, whiteness is a frequently unspoken norm against which “others” are evaluated (Bhopal, 2018; Byrne, 2006; Frankenberg, 1993). For Caron Bove and Jeffery Sobal (1989), likened to an “invisible knapsack” of privileges that can be utilized on a day-to-day basis. Yet some groups are seen as “not white enough” (Bhopal, 2018) and middle class consumption practices appear more valorized, while certain sections of the white working class become seen as less than respectable (Allen et al., 2015; Jones, 2012; McKenzie, 2015).

## 1.1 | Value, self-formation and legitimation

We engage with the literature on value and values, since it can help us to unpack the logic behind foodwork for mothers on a budget. When thinking through value, Skeggs (2010) explains that it can be explored in both concrete and abstract terms. Value in concrete terms relates to economic relationships between objects, while value in the abstract (or values) relates to what matters to people and how value can be attached to an object or a person (Skeggs, 2010). Importantly, the two conceptualizations: value and values are “always dialogic, dependent, and co-constituting” (Skeggs, 2014, p. 1)

Skeggs' work on respectability is key to the debate on how value and values might intersect. In her seminal work “*Class, Self, Culture*” (Skeggs, 2004), she highlights that while social class might remain mainly a matter of economic positioning, which is dictated by the position one holds in relation to the production system, the processes of struggle, exploitation and investment of value are not restricted to the economic sphere. Echoing Pierre Bourdieu, she argues that a broader understanding of social class can allow us to consider class struggle as also playing out through culture (Bourdieu, 1984). Importantly Skeggs (2004, 2011) moves this discussion of value into the arena of self-formation and legitimation. She identifies a “subject of value,” and charts its historical emergence

as firmly middle class in nature and conception. The important character of this subject is that it enfold an understanding of selfhood as one that can be invested in via a process of self-accrual. Also importantly, this accrual is directed towards the accumulation of future exchange-value in the marketplace. Skeggs also shows how the “exchange-value self” or “subject of value” is contextual, being legitimated within and across a range of social sites, the public performance of this exchange value self is a key way in which individuals make a claim for legitimacy, the “subject of entitlement, acquisition, and appropriation who moves across social space with ease constantly entering fields for the conversion and accrual of value” (Skeggs, 2011, p. 9).

In addition, the attribution of value in the cultural domain is intertwined with morality. As Skeggs (1997) shows in her *Formations of Class and Gender*, white working-class women attempt to escape the devaluation that their classed positioning brings, via a process of value acquisition. This process of accruing value to the self is a process of fighting devaluation, since cultural capital can be translated into economic capital and indeed social capital (Bourdieu, 1986). White working-class women, as she astutely shows, do not want to become middle class, they want to escape devaluation and they do so by investing in themselves and wanting to become “respectable.” Being seen as respectable is an investment in the future that these women make by taking care of themselves and learning cultural capital (respectable cultural practices and values). In other words, working class women become interested in “exchange value” rather than simply “use value,” since they calculate how their largely domestic practices outside of work can impact on their productivity and relations at work. Arguably then, respectability is acquired via the acquisition of values and practices, which are middle-class in form and nature (Skeggs, 2004), to the extent that middle-class selves are already pre-disposed to reproduce them.

In this and other work, Skeggs (1997) also observes that white working class forms of self-making might rely on an alternative form of ethical value system, one which is relational in form. She suggests that “caring for others often becomes a source of care for self. For those without access to traditional sources of value such as paid work and cultural capital, caring often provides the main demonstration of a women’s worth” (Skeggs, 2014, p. 12). In this respect care itself might be seen as an alternative form of value in the absence of the social and cultural capital needed to accrue exchange value.

## 1.2 | “Good mothering” and foodwork

Mothers’ accounts of their daily lives are often characterized by “the moral presentation of self in relation to public norms that constitute ‘good’ motherhood” (May, 2008, p. 470). Women seek to fulfill expectations of mothering both in their practices and in their accounts of such practices (Attree, 2005). While some of these expectations might be racially and culturally specific, scholars have highlighted how good mothering is centered around the unquestionable norm of “putting the children’s needs first” (McCarthy et al., 2000) and as such most mothers’ practices and narratives tend to align with this norm (Dowler & Calvert, 1995; May, 2008). While this norm seems to be commonly accepted across cultural settings, it is the interpretation of ‘children’s needs’ that can vary considerably between social classes.

Middle class understandings of good mothering and thus “putting the children’s needs first” (McCarthy et al., 2000), are centered around the idea of intensive mothering. The central pillars of intensive mothering are that the child is seen as innocent, at risk and beyond market value (Hays, 1996) and that to develop her/his full potential mothers have to learn how to do “good” mothering, which is an emotionally and financially demanding project. Here, doing mothering is thus a project oriented to the future since mothers invest in their children by supporting and facilitating their acquisition of cultural capital (from culinary capital to sports capital to the more classic cultural capital achieved via the education system). The ethical value system underpinning intensive mothering is oriented towards a middle-class accumulative and exchange model of selfhood, Skeggs’ “subject of value” or “exchange value self” (2011). Such a model also influences everyday foodwork. Middle-class women’s accounts of family healthy eating practices emphasize the value of exotic products, organic vegetables and

cooking meals from scratch, all of which involve significant resources of time, energy and money (Bugge & Almås, 2006; Cairns et al., 2013; Moisio et al., 2004; Wills et al., 2011). Here creative cooking might also be seen as attaching value to self via accumulation of social and cultural capital (Cairns et al., 2010) which then might be displayed and further invested outside the home (Cappellini et al., 2018). As Desiree Lewis observes these classed understandings of taste have also permeated food activism (Lewis, 2016). Her example is the Slow Food Movement in South Africa, where some strands of the movement serve to “entrench consumer capitalism’s regulating of entitled bodies with purchasing power and whose lifestyle and taste define the ‘norm’, and excluded bodies with no economic power or ‘taste’” (2016, p. 12).

Working class understandings of good mothering appear to be oriented around a different ethical value system, guided by a view of subjectivity in which “individuals exist because of and through their relationships with others, and cannot be regarded as separate, individualized subjects” (Gillies, 2007, p. 71). Parenting is seen as focused on the natural growth of the child rather than a future-orientated concerted cultivation (Eleff & Trethewey, 2006; Holloway & Pimlott-Wilson, 2014; Lareau, 2003; Shirani et al., 2012). While the importance of healthy food is recognized, foodwork tends also to be concentrated on food that is filling, and that children will enjoy; to avoid waste (Backett-Milburn et al., 2010) but also to materialize love and nurture (Lareau, 2003). A whole range of studies explore how cooking, and the creativity it might involve, serves to enhance relations with others. The family dinner has been seen as a metonym of the family itself through which people recognize themselves as families (Bugge & Almås, 2006; Moisio et al., 2004). Studies highlight the collective outcomes of creative foodwork observing its potential to build social and cultural capital and validate family identity over time (McCabe & de Waal Malefyt, 2015). While much more work is needed to explore the intersections between mothering, race, class and foodwork, Pamela Attlee’s systematic review of research on low income mothers, nutrition and health found “striking similarities in women’s accounts of caring for children in poverty” (2005, p. 230), in samples which were ethnically diverse.

While the above two racialized and classed understanding of good mothering coexist in the UK and US contexts (Lareau, 2003; Lee et al., 2014), intensive mothering has gradually become the normalized standard through which mothering is conceptualized and judged by policy makers, health, and educational experts (Romagnoli & Wall, 2012). As Gillies (2020, p. 164) affirms that since “the conviction that childrearing has the power to shape personal destinies and secure national prosperity” a neoliberal understanding of parenting centered around intensive mothering is becoming a global standard framing family life, identities, and relationships. While this macro analysis of parenting in neoliberal times is useful for understanding how intensive mothering dominates the way policymakers think of family life, it would be reductionist to frame white middle-class mothering as driven only by calculatedness and economic rationality. As Simon Duncan and Rosalind Edwards (Duncan & Edwards, 1997, 1999, 2003) point out, mothers operate within “gendered moral rationalities” which are more contingent on “moral views developed within ... local social networks, about what sort of behavior was [is] right and proper for mothers with dependent children” (2003, p. 10) than on any classed orientation to capital, they show how “structure and agency are linked by establishing how norms, values, and beliefs guide specific behavior in particular contexts” (2003, p. 20).

In the UK context of our study, stress and anxiety have grown significantly for women after the recent austerity policies whose effects are still visible today (Brah et al., 2015; Ipsos MORI, 2013; Pearson & Elson, 2015). Studies show that reduced household income has immediate effects on foodwork: causing women to change supermarket, alter their diet and to spend more time and effort in acquiring food (Cappellini et al., 2014; Ipsos MORI, 2013). Whereas some costs such as rent are seen as fixed and hard to negotiate food can be perceived as an area where people may have more scope to cut back in times of financial difficulty (Ipsos MORI, 2013). The relentless work of shopping for food with little money is a significant source of stress and anxiety for mothers (Arendell, 2000; Cappellini et al., 2014; Dowler, 1997; Gillies, 2007; Hutton, 2015; McCarthy et al., 2000). The work of poverty includes coping with the hardship of financial uncertainties, the marketplace demands of intensive motherhood and taking on responsibility for the emotional maintenance of family life (Cappellini et al., 2019; Leigh et al., 2012; Molander & Hartmann, 2018). None of this is new though, Maud Pember Reeves’ book “Round About a Pound a Week” details the lives of 30 households of the working poor in Lambeth, London (Reeves, 1914). The book outlines the dire

conditions and the grinding work of survival, clearly documenting the sheer skill, self-sacrifice and ingenuity that women put into managing resources that were barely enough, and most often not enough, to ensure the health and thriving of the family.

## 2 | METHODOLOGY

Our study included 12 women who self-identified as living on a low or reduced income. Participants were recruited via a purposive and snowball sampling technique using a flyer about the research which was shared through personal and professional networks. The final sample included women based in the London area (6), the Midlands (4) and Essex (2). Table 1 provides an overview of the main household characteristics of our participants. Participants were aged between 29 and 43 and had between one and six children. Eleven of our participants were white British and one participant was Indian<sup>1</sup>.

Our participants were interviewed about the management of foodwork and provisioning within their households, and the practices surrounding the work of providing meals for the family. Interviews were held in participants' homes and generally lasted an hour. We also sought, where convenient for our participants, to accompany them shopping in order to observe their practices in action. Accompanied shopping trips took place with nine participants (one online and eight physical trips to the shops). Here we undertook walking interviews which are particularly useful for exploring topics with a mobile element, such as shopping (Fincham et al., 2010; Jones et al., 2008). By exploring topics "on the move" we hoped to generate rapport through informal conversation and shared responses to sights and sounds in the environment. These shopping trips provided insight into the practicalities of food acquisition: how participants navigated the spatial layout of the shops when looking for special offers, the disappointment of anticipated special offers no longer being available, fatigue of going to many different shops and the difficulty of dealing with constant requests from children. During the accompanied shopping trips, the researchers tried to "blend in" as much as possible; however, they also took basic notes on a notepad (which looked a bit like a shopping list) which were written up later, as well as an audio recording of the walking interviews, we also took photos of salient aspects. The three authors each conducted a third of the interviews and follow up shopping trips. It is important to acknowledge that our presence as three white academics (two British and one Italian), would not have been without influence, particularly with respect to how participants chose to present themselves to us. While we are all employed within an occupation which is historically most closely associated with a middle class disposition, we have individual histories which encompass experiences of living on relatively low incomes. During the time we spent with participants these experiences were undoubtedly brought to bear in finding common ground and making connections and there was a significant amount of humor and laughter during our shopping trips.

Ethical approval was gained from the authors' institutions at the time of the study. Participants were provided with information sheets and informed consent forms which were also explained verbally. Pseudonyms have been used in the article to preserve anonymity. Interviews were transcribed verbatim and analyzed inductively using thematic coding (Silverman, 2006). Our thematic analysis started with an open coding and, following an inductive process, a joint interpretation between the three authors was generated via a back-and forth between data and literature (Spiggle, 1994). The final interpretation resulted from a collaborative approach to data analysis which echoes feminist methodology which aims to give voice to women's everyday lives. We treated the interview material as "localized accounts" of practices, ideas and identities (Alvesson, 2003). In analyzing interviews with mothers of children with chronic diseases, Mara Buchbinder (2010) points out how each account should be examined as "situated within its pragmatic framework, in which the moral character of the protagonist is always at stake" (p. 111), as such accounts are "deeply embedded in moral and legal frameworks" (p. 117). In our specific case, participants' accounts were located within a specific framework, a *here and now* in which domestic foodwork is connected to practices and understandings of mothering. Our thematic analysis was guided by the literature on mothering and foodwork which highlights how some food practices and understandings are valued while others are

TABLE 1 Participant Information

Name	Age	Education	Household composition	Occupation	Partner's occupation	H/hold annual income
Fiona	36	High school	Lone parent, lives with her 12 year old and 5 month old daughters in a rented house	P/T administrator	N/A	£11–20,000
Sarah	43	Degree	Lives with her partner and 7 year old twins in an owner occupied house	P/T nurse	F/T administrator	£31–40,000
Emily	42	High school	Lives with her partner and four children (aged 21, 12, 12 and 7) in a rented house	P/T administrator	Unemployed	£21–30,000
Liz	40	High school	Lives with her partner and six children (aged 19, 17, 13, 11, and 7 and 2) in a rented house	Primary carer	Builder on fixed term contract	£11–20,000
Rose	32	Degree	Lives with her partner and two children (aged 3 and 6 months) in a rented house	Teacher on mat leave	P/T builder	£21–30,000
Jo	29	High school	Lives with her partner and four children (aged 9, 6, 4 and 2) in a rented house	Primary carer	Retail assistant	£21–30,000
Helen	39	High school	Lives with her 17 year old daughter in a part-buy/part-rent housing association house	Administrator	N/A	£21–30,000
Kirsty	38	High school	Lives with her 7 year old daughter in a rented house	Administrator	N/A	£21–30,000
Priya	38	Degree	Lives with her partner and two children (aged 2 and 9) in a rented flat	Primary carer	F/T salesperson	£21–30,000
Serena	40	High school	Lives with her partner and four children (aged 5, 13, 18 and 20) in a part-buy/part-rent housing association house	Primary carer	Painter and decorator	£21–30,000
Linda	34	Degree	Lives with her partner and two children (3 years and 7 months) in a rented house	P/T administrator	Primary school teacher	£21–30,000
Katie	38	Degree	Lives with her partner and three children (aged 12, 7 and 2) in an owner occupied house	P/T designer	F/T college lecturer	£31–40,000

devalued. As such our open coding and later on our data analysis and interpretation focus on how mothers' accounts were positioned in relation to their own understandings and practices of mothering.

### 3 | FINDINGS

#### 3.1 | Food-laboring: Translating value from the marketplace to kitchen

In practices of planning and acquisition, extracting value in the marketplace was seen by participants as a thrifty matter of “doing more with less” (Cappellini et al., 2020). This was achieved via a myriad of saving mechanisms: from detailed short- and long-term planning to careful decision making in the supermarket (Cairns et al., 2013; Miller, 1998). A clear knowhow was evident in participants' description of their “strategic coping” (Attree, 2005) which included swapping supermarkets to take advantage of special offers, comparing prices and knowing where to buy what (Cappellini et al., 2014). As previous authors have found, white mothers from low-income families employ complex knowledge when doing the food shopping (Beagan et al., 2018). While some made use of the special offers, which were described as an opportunity for saving money and getting “value for money,” others remained more skeptical, since offers might disrupt their weekly plan and budget. As Sarah observed: *I try not to fall for the gimmicks, to be honest. Special offers were often evaluated in relation to the perceived quality of the products on offer and how their consumption would fit in with already-planned meals. For example, Katie talks about buying meat in Sainsbury's while doing the rest of her food shopping at Aldi.*

*I find it [Sainsbury's] better quality but it does tend to be a bit more expensive. They have always got some offers on where it's three products for £10, so I might get the mince in, I might get the chicken and do that because that works out more cost effective. If I am going to Sainsbury's I will probably get that three on an offer and you can mix it with like a chicken for a roast dinner or a chicken breast, so I could make I don't know, the kids like Fajitas on the wraps and it might be chicken pasta or something.*

As Katie illustrates, saving is a complex process in which food is evaluated not simply economically, but also in functional and relational terms (Daly, 2015). In functional terms she considers its perceived quality (she considers meat at Sainsbury's better quality than meat at Aldi) and versatility that is the possibility of being used for a variety of dishes. At the same time she evaluates the food in relational terms, she is considering what the children are likely to eat both because she wants to provide them with food they like (DeVault, 1991) but also because she can't afford the risk of them rejecting meals (Gillies, 2007). Versatility is important since deviations from planned meals can happen in the changing rhythms of family life (Cappellini & Parsons, 2012; Evans, 2014), Katie needs to build flexibility into her meal planning thus she buys versatile items that can be used for a range of dishes and re-used as leftovers which can be transformed into other dishes. This practical approach to combining ingredients and constructing meals was also evident in other participants' accounts:

*If I make burgers, or something like that, I will probably mince up onions, and pack it out with bits of vegetables and stuff, because then it makes the meat go further.*

(Jo)

*If I'm skint I can stretch it. I can make a lot of especially pasta, pasta sauces, cheesy pasta. I can really make it stretch. If I haven't got much money I'll make sure I'll get some fruit and vegetables. [...] I just try and do big portions so that I freeze it and then bring it out the week after and go, “Look what I've made”. You've got to be creative, very creative.*

(Kirsty)

Our participants' descriptions of making ingredients "stretch" and "go further" shows how food as a resource can be subject to a series of complex (re)valuations which are entirely contextual (i.e., sites of the supermarket, kitchen, and meal table). But what is important is the labor and creativity involved in stretching out this resource across a range of sites and associated relations. The labor of these women resides in the translation of food between sites and contexts and its embedding in a series of relations which variously foreground and realize its value as "economic," "functional," and "relational" (Daly, 2015). Here creativity is directed towards value extraction as much as self-expression.

### 3.2 | Foodwork as foodcare: Investing in "good" food for the family and self

The above discussion explores the skills and creativity the mothers we spoke to put into acquiring resources in the marketplace to transform them into food that can be appreciated by the family. In this section we will show how such food becomes "good" food and thus incorporated in their own understandings of care for others. For many participants, good food is food that has certain characteristics and standards. Take for example the case of Helen, a lone parent who talks about her directing her limited financial resources to provide food that is considered "nutritious."

*I suppose the driving thing in my mind is, "I need to get a nutritious meal. I need to do this, and I know I can give them lots of vegetables and pasta."*

For Helen providing a good meal is a matter of feeding her daughter an abundance of vegetables and pasta. If previous literature on white working class food culture highlights how mothers are less concerned about the nutritional aspects of their meals (Wills et al., 2011), our participants seem to be very aware of the healthy aspects of their diets. They also seem to be very aware of the stigmatized criticism around white working class women feeding processed food to their children (Cairns et al., 2018). This is what emerged in talking to Rose about the meals she provides to her 3-year-old son, Jon.

*The processed thing is a big thing for me. [...] I have got friends, like Jo, and it's not a criticism at all, who do have processed food. I wouldn't give Jon oven chips, he's had them occasionally, there's nothing wrong with them, but I make everything pretty much from scratch or fresh. I think it's cheaper to live off frozen food or tinned food or things like that, but I just can't do it, unless it's an emergency.*

Rose compares her standards of a good meal (fresh food cooked from scratch) with the ones of her friend (processed food) and she distances herself from a diet that she does not consider appropriate for her family (living off frozen food). Interestingly caring for her children seems to translate into a care for self as feeling competent and being creative in foodwork seem for her to be significant sources of self-esteem, and self-worth (Cappellini et al., 2019; McCabe & de Waal Malefyt, 2015). As she says:

*To be honest, it's really, really hard, but when I do it and we get by and we still have a nice life and we still eat nice food and we don't go hungry, I do feel quite proud of myself sometimes.*

(Rose)

Marylyn Carrigan and Isabelle Szmigin explore the inventiveness with which mothers in their sample engaged with convenience foods, using them to negotiate the role of caretaker but also to reflexively maintain a sense of autonomy (Carrigan and Szmigin, 2006). This form of investment in self is a far cry from an expressive creativity instead it is focused on "sustaining relational bonds, generating a sense of security, wellbeing and contentment both



for the cooks themselves as well as for those they feed.” (Lewis, 2016, p. 7). In fact, in a context of limited financial resources, our participants enact creativity very differently “generating their person value through investment and connections to others rather than investments in distinction and self.” (Skeggs and Loveday, 2012, p. 487). Rather than being oriented towards attaching value to their self via the future accrual of capital, foodwork is rooted in present relations of care saturated with past affective experiences where relationships are “cemented on the basis of memories of intimacy and care.” (Lewis, 2016, p. 10). For example, Katie talks about deciding what to give her older children for dinner in this way:

*It's hard as well, but I try and balance it out. I've got a son that doesn't like potatoes but my daughter does like potatoes, my son likes pasta and my daughter's not as keen on pasta, so I try and do it so that we're eating a variety of each of those things so they're going to have a night where there's something they don't particularly like, but the next night might be something that they enjoy more.*

While creativity is seen as a way in which white middle-class mothers escape the boredom of their routinized cooking (McCabe & de Waal Malefyt, 2015) for Katie and many other participants, creativity is in balancing children's preferences in providing a variety of “good” food which she knows they will appreciate. This logic of care also enfold a very different understanding of the individual. Rather than the future focused, self-expressive, creative cook, who experiments with exotic products, new brands and ingredients both as a form of investing in the self, and for sheer enjoyment (Moisio et al., 2004) we find our participants' focus on cooking more often than not involved the constraint of expression, and abnegation of their own need in preference for the needs of others (Cappellini & Parsons, 2012; Molander & Hartmann, 2018). As such, significant creativity was employed in navigating the market to “avoid temptation.” Participants typically individualized and internalized responsibility for budgeting viewing their “self” as in need of careful control (Cappellini et al., 2014; Attree, 2005), while prioritizing the needs of the children, as Emily explained:

*Well the priorities are just to make sure the kids have got food on the table. I'll just give up whatever I need, any luxuries, well I say getting my hair done which I don't do anyway, going out for meals, just anything that is—buying clothes, anything that you don't need.*

In summary, there is a constant weighing up and prioritizing between a range of needs of family members reflecting a hierarchy of spending with children at the top, then husbands and mothers at the bottom (Cappellini et al., 2019; Daly, 2015; Hamilton, 2009).

### 3.3 | Keeping up appearances: Avoiding devaluation and maintaining respectability

As others have found, the mothers in our sample re-direct and invest what they have saved with their foodwork in attempts to “maintain ‘mainstream’ diets for their children, despite costs to their personal health and well-being” (Attree, 2005, p. 26). Keeping up with the mainstream means maintaining a level of respectability in which public display and local comparison is important. Duncan and Edwards (1997, 1999, 2003) argue that moral understandings of what constitutes “good mothering” are rooted in local social networks. Living in relatively affluent areas where housing and other expenses such as childcare were high, was an additional source of stress for our participants. They also typically used local comparisons to position their own foodwork practices favorably in relation to others, see for example Rose's comment above where she observes that her friend Jo “does have processed food” while she cooks from scratch.

The “stretching out” discussed in the first section releases financial resources which can then be spent in displays and celebration and enjoyment of family in public leisure spaces. Work on food budgeting has also shown

creative correspondences between saving and spending, and the fine-grained work of allocation of resources in the household (Cappellini et al., 2019; Daly, 2015; Kochuyt, 2004; Zelizer, 1994). Typical examples of reinvestments are extra-curricular activities for the children. As Emily says:

*You have still got to pay all the other bills, food and school trips. Some of them were free but I used to try and pay for his because I didn't want him to be looked at like a kid that was poor or something. It is not nice.*

For Emily, spending money on school trips was a matter of respectability, seen as vital to ensure that her child was accepted by their peers (and teachers) and not tainted by the stigma of poverty (Shildrick & MacDonald, 2013). As Victoria Lawson (2014, p. 2047) observes: "Cultural and political imaginaries of poor people as disgusting, threatening, and criminal" are still prevalent in society. For the mothers we spoke to making sure that the children could participate, at least to some extent, in the consumer culture around them, involved a constant monitoring of the expenses and deciding how to reinvest the saved resources. While the literature on middle class parenting highlights that extracurricular activities for their children are seen as a future focused investment directed at the competitive accumulation of cultural capital (Eleff & Trethewey, 2006; Lareau, 2003; Lee et al., 2014), in our case the mothers were more concerned with merely keeping up (rather than accumulating) in attempts to maintain respectability.

Other examples of utilizing resources that have been saved via foodwork in a more public setting were family day trips, such as to theme parks. These were occasional events for our sample, but they were a significant part of participants' accounts as Kirsty explained:

*We're going to Alton Towers tomorrow because we've been saving tokens. We've got two for one. There's a great day out, it's costing us £20. They're the things. You look forward to it and you appreciate them, don't you, because you're not just getting everything.*

As well as being the practical targets for saving these family events also formed a more general positive affective background frequently accounted for as "something look forward to" and thus helped participants to cope with the difficulties of the day-to-day grind of budgeting (Hulme, 2019). However, days out often presented unseen obstacles and had to be meticulously planned in advance to try and make savings, but more importantly to avoid over spending situations. As revealed in the following conversation with Kirsty during her Lidl shopping trip about a forthcoming visit to Alton Towers:

*All they've got is Burger King, any fast food joints there and I don't really want to eat that because it's just crap. Can I say that? It's just crap. I want to get some things today, maybe make some tuna pasta and get some salad and bottles of water so that we're having proper food and it's not costing £20 for a couple of burgers and chips.*

Kirsty contrasts her choice of "proper" food (pasta, salad, bottles of water) with the burgers and fast food available at Alton Towers and considers her choice "better" both in financial and nutritional terms. But there is also undoubtedly an element of wanting to be seen as providing good food for her family and thus her use of the term "proper food" is significant in that it involves a moral evaluation of foodwork. As Brenda Beagan, Elaine Power and Gwen Chapman find, there is a distancing from 'lowbrow' foods though a discourse of healthy eating (Beagan et al., 2015, p. 87). Participants' accounts of public spending situations also highlighted the anxiety involved in having to constantly curb spending and thus provoke emotional responses in the children. As Kirsty observes:

*I would like to be able to go out and if the kids say, "Oh, can I have that?" I can go, "Yes." But quite often I get called the 'meanie' because I'm the one who tends to say, "No."*

Kirsty's comment reveals the emotional and affective burden of monitoring spending (Attree, 2005; Hutton, 2019), and the fact that this responsibility often attracts blame from the children. Because she tries to shield them from the full extent of the household financial difficulties they are naïve to the reasons behind her decisions. Meeting children's needs via consumption is also central to the display of (middle-class, white) 'good mothering' so such public instances of falling short create further anxiety and stress.

## 4 | DISCUSSION

In the above analysis we have brought out the complexities of foodwork seeing it as important both economically and relationally. Our first section of analysis foregrounded the labor of foodwork in stretching out the potentialities of food for re-valuation. The second section highlighted foodwork as foodcare a form of nurture both for the mothers we spoke to themselves and for their families and the elements of self-abnegation and prioritization of children involved. The third section examined the relational and contextual dimensions of foodwork where identities are affirmed through a public display of mothering and family life via food choices and consumption. Importantly for our sample of mothers these displays were motivated by the drive to avoid devaluation as opposed to accumulating value. From this analysis we have two sets of contributions to make, first to understandings of how foodwork can be classed and classing by re-producing valued forms of subjectivity. Second the significance of seeing foodwork as "work" underscoring its wider role within social reproduction but also in its nurturing and affective dimensions and capacities. As such we argue that foodwork can usefully be seen as both food-labor and as foodcare and we develop theorization of the latter.

### 4.1 | Foodwork and classed identity

We have approached our analysis of foodwork and identity using the frame of value and values inspired by Skeggs's (1997, 2004, 2011) work. The mothers in our sample generate their 'person value' (Skeggs, 2011) through investments in the relational and nurturing elements of foodwork. Such investments are underwritten by significant calculation of where best to invest time, emotional energy and money. Careful planning, careful shopping and cooking are driven by saving economic resources while maintaining a diet that is considered "good." In doing so we have revealed how these mothers on restricted budgets both perform the work of care and nurture but also attempt to gain access to structures of value in securing valued positions for themselves and their families. We argue that the struggle to accrue value is rendered even more difficult for such mothers because the valued modes of doing mothering in the UK are based almost entirely on a (predominantly white) middle-class accumulative understanding of selfhood, one driven by exchange values. This is problematic for the mothers who participated in this study because undoubtedly they don't have the "luxury," to use their own expression, in terms of time and money to be able to resource intensive mothering but additionally, as other studies have shown, white working-class mothers operate within a different ethical value system driven by use value and relational in character (Banister et al., 2016; Luxton, 1980; Skeggs, 2004; Romagnoli & Wall, 2012).

We also find an important correspondence between the domestic and public realms in which resources saved through the careful planning and stretching out of food are invested in days out in which the family is celebrated and displayed outside the home. Forty years ago, Meg Luxton remarked that "though their work women are instrumental in creating the face that the household presents to the world" (Luxton, 1980, p. 17). This is indeed the case of our participants' constant saving and then spending with the aim of achieving the "high standard of living and the greatest degree of emotional and psychical well-being possible" (Luxton, 1980, p. 17). Luxton's remarks are still relevant today as they suggest that foodwork in public contexts remains subject to the dominant symbolic. Participants' accounts were undergirded by a desire to display good motherhood in public through the careful

choice of healthy food. Previous literature has suggested that white middle class foodwork may be about the future focused building up of cultural capital (Wills et al., 2011), as a form of investment in the self and in particular in their children with a view to creating “extractable value.” In contrast, the investments made by the mothers in our study have a much more immediate imperative, rather than being accumulative strategies they can be understood more as a defense against devaluation. Furthermore, for those mothers resident in relatively affluent areas living in proximity meant that the values of middle-class mothering were never far from sight and often constituted the standards they were judged against, and indeed judged themselves against (see also Duncan & Edwards, 2003). As Skeggs observes of white working class young women who are invested in a caring self “The investments in themselves can only work if they invest in others and others invest in them” (1997, p. 56). This is what makes foodwork rewarding but also very stressful (Hutton, 2015), reliant as it is on reciprocity and the recognition and the evaluations of others.

## 4.2 | Revisiting the “work” of foodwork: Food-labor and foodcare

In our concern to capture both the economic and social/relational significance of foodwork we propose the use of the terms food-labor and foodcare. With respect to food-labor our analysis reveals the skill, competence and resourcefulness mothers on low incomes bring to translating and re-embedding food across contexts and relations in order to realize value in various forms (economic and functional, as well as relational). When the mothers in our study talk about “stretching out” they are not only referring to the stretching out of food over time, they are also referencing the stretching out of food across sites, contexts and relations for its potential (re)valuation. Indeed, the complex skills of planning and evaluation cut across the sites of the supermarket and the home, as Lewis (2016, p. 8) observes cooking involves “a dynamic transformation of food items with distinct trajectories.” While meal plans are made while keeping in mind family schedules, individual tastes and costs, so many elements of these features are dynamic and subject to change moment to moment, they represent a continual moving feast so to speak. This underscores the highly contextual and relational nature of evaluation. It also underscores the fact that creativity is not only directed towards self-expression but is also bound up in the extraction of value.

In line with much recent thinking about the relational, reciprocal and nurturing elements of care we observe that foodcare enfold an ethic of care (Tronto, 1993) in which the affective and moral dimensions of nurturing others and taking care of them are central to understanding the orientations of this work. Care can be described as “a species activity that includes everything we do to maintain, continue, and ‘repair’ our world so that we can live in it as long as possible” (Tronto, 1993, p. 103). Foodcare might also be usefully thought of as a form of “love laboring” (Lynch, 2007) which involves an intimate knowledge of the needs of family and how best to meet these needs (DeVault, 1991; Miller, 1998). By conceptualizing foodwork as ‘foodcare’ we highlight its potential in offering mothers an alternative to the logic of capital for their demonstration of self-worth. We also take inspiration from radical care theorists who argue for care more generally as offering ‘an ontology of connection, a language of ethics and of interconnected radical responsibility (as distinct from individualized responsibility)’ (Lawson, 2014, p. 2049). Here Penny Van Esterick’s (Van Esterick, 1999, pp. 160-161) model of feminist food praxis is also instructive, embracing foodwork as foodcare involves an epistemological shift: ‘Cooking and eating, feeding the self and feeding others concern metaphor, pattern and system and call for an epistemology of cause and effect...Terms like *nurture*, *reciprocity* and *intimacy* have no meaning without context, but they require a paradigm shift in thinking’ (Van Esterick, 1999, p. 159, emphasis in original). Without being over-celebratory we also posit that it may also have potential for agency which is at present somewhat under-stated. As Lewis (2016, p. 7) observes “food is not only a functional and nutritious source for ensuring productive bodies; food is also linked to feelings, agencies and pleasures that extend our conventional understandings of the dimensions of freedoms.” The potential agentic quality of foodcare also resides in the creativity and competence needed to feed the family under constrained and

changing circumstances: “They are actively creative in producing something new that is grounded in the familiar, as they are responsive to a network of social relations” (McCabe & de Waal Malefyt, 2015, p. 62).

## 5 | CONCLUSION

Foodwork is complex, it involves productive, nurturing and reproductive work and typically confounds the distinction between these. It also routinely crosses public and private boundaries involving purchase and acquisition, and the public sharing of meals as well as the domestic preparation and consumption of food. While this paper has focused in on the micro-everyday practices and decisions of a group of mainly white mothers on low or reduced incomes, we can draw more macro insights pertaining to wider economies of foodcare.

In developing the concept of diverse economies Jenny Cameron and Julie Katherine Gibson-Graham (2003) argue against a simply adding in of unrecognized sectors of the economy, rather a more radical re-thinking of the economy, because: “by staying within a binary framing of economic activities (masculinized/market and feminized/household, etc.), the “added in” sectors, though recognized and counted, remain locked in the subordinate, under/devalued position vis-à-vis the ‘core’ economy” (2003, p. 151). Such an approach would go beyond merely arguing for a revaluing of foodcare instead it would involve a careful inventory of the market and non-market, waged and unwaged, and capitalist and non-capitalist contexts of this work—those Cameron and Gibson-Graham (2003) propose in relation to the diverse economies of childcare. As such we are not arguing for a simple binary in which white middle class food practices are embedded in an ontological commitment to capitalist accumulation and white working class food practices a relational ontology, rather as Cameron and Gibson-Graham argue in relation to diverse economies—foodcare is enacted within, and made sense of within, a range of market and non-market relations in which “capitalist social relations are just one set among many” (Morrow & Dombroski, 2015, p. 82).

This recognition of foodcare within a diverse economy is vital if we are to capture the ways in which race, religion, sexuality and other areas of social identity and social divisions shape the valorization of foodcare. This is not least because the gains in the labor market made by white middle and upper-class women are partly a result of transferring their unpaid care work onto other women who are often immigrants, and women of color (Duffy, 2005; Romero, 1992; Tronto, 2002). Mignon Duffy (2005) also highlights that the move towards understanding and promoting care purely as a relational and nurturing activity could have the effect of devaluing the more routinized and mundane reproductive work of care, jobs in which women of color are more heavily concentrated.

Introducing the conceptual lens of foodcare to debates on foodwork demonstrates its wider significance within the broader network of care relationships that are vital for the continuing sustainable existence of our economy and ecology (Dombroski et al., 2018). Further work is needed to explore, inventory and make visible “who” is doing this work. But we also need to explore “*what* this care work now entails, and *how* we might—collectively, across gender and other lines of class, sexuality, culture, species—both redistribute and proliferate this work of care” (Dombroski et al., 2018, p. 100). At the level of the individual we have shown that foodwork might be usefully seen *both* as a form of food-labor *and* as a form of foodcare which is productive of valued forms of selfhood not reliant on, and shaped by, the market and alienating forms of labor. Further work is needed to explore how foodcare in a range of other contexts and conditions offers opportunities for value accrual that exist beyond the logic of capital.

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## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Owing to the sensitive nature of the data, the data have not been made publicly available.

## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> It is important to note that this composition of our sample, based on participants' own self-definitions, means that most of our discussion explores the experiences of white British mothers as opposed to racially minoritized motherhood. Social class intersected with ethnicity to mean that participants were generally free from concerns about the potential for experiencing racism in their everyday shopping practices whilst at times facing challenges in terms of feeding the family on a low or reduced incomes.

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