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# Fridge stories and other tales from the kitchen: a methodological toolbox for getting closer to everyday food practices

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## ABSTRACT

In this paper we present a methodological toolbox as a useful research approach for investigating domestic food practices. Consumption research often relies strongly on interviews or surveys. While helpful, such methods inevitably create a distance between the verbalization of the studied practice and the practice itself, inviting post hoc rationalization. The toolbox helps the researcher to get closer to the studied practice by combining interviews with methods based on observation, visualization and verbalization, in or close to practice. The toolbox holds a variety of methods and we describe fridge stories, food mapping, shop-alongs and food diaries. Through a practical discussion of the advantages and difficulties of these methods, and their combined use, we hope our paper can be useful to other researchers and students interested in everyday food practices.

## KEYWORDS

Methodology; food practices; fridge stories; food mapping; shop-along; food diaries; everyday life; food consumption

## 1. Introduction

When studying everyday food practices, it can be a challenge to get beyond well-rehearsed explanations of consumption choices. How can we create a research situation in which we, together with the participants, can come closer to sense-making in practice, including not-yet-verbalized aspects? In our individual PhD projects (Joosse 2014; Marshall 2016), we each explored different method combinations to understand the social and cultural aspects of food consumption.

Descriptions of research design and methodology in published articles are often brief, and although applications such as kitchen tours and shop-alongs may seem self-explanatory, we found many practical issues to consider and pitfalls to avoid. Therefore, our aim here is to present our methods in more detail, in the belief that this will be of use to other students and researchers of everyday food practices. As well as presenting the individual methods, we discuss and describe how these methods can be combined, and propose a flexible research design through the metaphor of the methodological toolbox.

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This paper is the result of discussions about our separate research projects. Despite different disciplinary backgrounds in human geography and ethnology, we found our methodological ideas quite similar and our methods overlapping or complementary. Importantly, we do not claim a revolutionary contribution, as our methods are adaptations of already existing methods, and flexible research designs have been proposed before. Instead, by sharing insights gained and difficulties encountered, we wish to share a bit more of our “backstage” (Joosse et al. 2020) of doing research, and propose ways to think through the choice of (combination of) methods.

Our paper has the following structure: in [Section 2](#) we draw on practice theory to explain why we developed a toolbox approach to get closer to everyday food practices; [Section 3](#) gives a short overview of our separate research projects, as background context for the methods discussed; we present our toolbox approach in [Section 4](#); in [Section 5](#) we introduce five functions of the toolbox, and discuss each method, namely fridge stories, food mapping, the shop-along and food diaries; in [Section 6](#) we discuss how the methods can be combined through a toolbox approach; [Section 7](#) concludes the article with proposals for further development of the methodological toolbox for the study of everyday food practices.

## 2. Situating practical knowledge

There is by now a growing body of literature that discusses the research benefits of getting closer to practices, and methods to do so. In fields such as anthropology, sociology and human geography a variety of visual, interactive and other methodologies have been developed and used (see e.g., Prosser 1998; Rose 2016; Pink 2013; Bissell 2010). There has also recently been much methodological development in studies of cooking, shopping and eating practices (e.g., Halkier 2009; Evans 2012; O’Connell 2013; Power 2003). Here, we present our toolbox as positioned in, and inspired by, this literature.

Our motivation for wanting to get closer to practices, is that because people make sense of the world based on the practices they are involved in, it is important for understanding the practices, to link the research situation to the practice studied. To explain this statement, we take practice theory – the basic epistemological lens of our research – as our point of entry.<sup>1</sup> The central concept in practice theory is “practice”, defined as:

a routinized type of behaviour which consists of several elements, interconnected to one other: forms of bodily activities, forms of mental activities, ‘things’ and their use, a background knowledge in the form of understanding, know-how, states of emotion and motivational knowledge (Reckwitz 2002, 249).

The use of the concepts “mental activities”, “understanding” and “motivational knowledge” in Reckwitz’ definition above indicates that practice theory emphasizes knowledge that actors are able to express verbally. This knowledge is sometimes termed codified or explicit knowledge (Gertler 2003) and, according to Giddens, such knowledge is located in the discursive consciousness (1979, 5). Through the use of terms such as “bodily”, “routines” and “practical know-how”, the definition also calls attention to embodied and tacit knowledge. The study of tacit knowledge poses a methodological challenge, as such knowledge is difficult to express verbally because: 1) it is part of practical rather than

discursive consciousness (Giddens 1979), meaning that actors are not aware of the knowledge they draw upon (Power 2003); 2) even if actors are aware, language may be inadequate to convey the knowledge (Gertler 2003), and; 3) the knowledge is created in a specific practice and may be difficult to understand outside that practice – the knowledge is situated.

It is therefore not surprising that many methods only target discursive consciousness. For example, the qualitative interview (prominent in qualitative research) primarily targets discursive consciousness. Importantly, interviewers can make up for this omission by asking about tacit knowledge, since people are capable of reflecting on their actions, thus making practical consciousness discursive (Hitchings 2012).

Even though interviewing may help people become aware of their practical knowledge, verbalizing it might still pose a challenge because of the inadequacy of language, and the situatedness of knowledge. Moreover, interviews tend to encourage what is commonly termed post hoc rationalization (Vaisey 2009; Haidt 2012), which means that we formulate reasons for our actions afterward, based on what we at that moment think sounds sensible and rational. Following practice theory, it is more logical to move the focus from the temporal (as in post hoc rationalization) to “being situated in or outside a practice” as a key factor influencing sense-making. Post hoc then becomes ex situ rationalization, i.e., the tendency to make sense of our actions based on the norms and meanings present in the practice in which we are currently situated and performing.

To elaborate, practice theory views practices as the location of the social. Thus, meaning does not reside in actors or structures, but is (re)produced in and through practices (Reckwitz 2002). Instead of viewing meaning as an independent mental phenomenon situated in an individual’s mind, ready to be discovered through e.g., interviews, meaning is performed and situated in and through practices. Following practice theory, the interview itself should also be considered a practice; in the dialogue between respondent and interviewer meanings are created, which might differ from the meanings created by the respondent in other practices. Consequently, interviewing is not just a technique for “tapping subjects on their knowledge” about their experiences outside the interview situation (Alvesson 2003, 14); participants in interviews do not merely report thoughts and motivations on the studied practice. Instead, they produce situated accounts, situated in the interview and adapted to the logics of the interviewing practice (Alvesson 2003).

These theoretical propositions made us realize that for our specific projects it was useful to complement interviews with other methods to come closer to the studied practice. While we both find the interview a powerful method of inquiry and both of us rely on it as our primary research method (see also Hitchings 2012), we suggest here complementing and combining the interview with other qualitative methods to study practices. This can be done, for example, by observing the practice, or by participant observation. Another possibility is *to make the studied practice more present in the research situation*. While the first two options are common practice in qualitative methodology, we believe that the third option merits deeper consideration.

### 3. Our projects

To contextualize the use of the proposed methods in the toolbox, we include a brief overview of our separate research projects (see Table 1). Sofie’s work was part of a larger

**Table 1.** Overview of the research projects.

	Sofie	Matilda
Aim or research question	Given the disputed and ambiguous nature of the term local food, how do people – interested in local food – source and value their food?	To describe and analyze sustainability as a collection of meaning-making practices through the study of domestic food consumption.
Research population	21 people interested in local food living within 35 km from Uppsala, Sweden.	19 people from 15 households interested in food/sustainability in Umeå municipality, Sweden.
Recruitment	Via organizations or business in local food and through snowball selection.	Through contacts, snowballing and advertisements on billboards and e-mail lists.
Method	Single visits of minimally 1,5 hours in which fridge stories and a food mapping were performed. Follow-up interviews with 2 respondents who had altered their food practices. Participant observation at food sourcing places (connected to another sub-study within the larger project).	3–4 meetings, 1–3 hours each, spread out over approx. one year. Included interviews, fridge stories, shop-alongs, image elicitation, participant observations and a food diary.
Material collected	Audio recordings, pictures, maps, notes.	Audio recordings, photographs, notes and food diaries.
Analytical strategy	Each interview was recorded, transcribed verbatim and coded according to dominant themes.	Each interview was recorded, transcribed verbatim and coded according to dominant themes.

research project about local food, with focus on how consumers, intermediaries, producers and authorities respectively understood local food. Thus, the research used in this sub-study has been informed by the other parts of her larger research project. Matilda's research focused on how people understood, dealt with, and negotiated sustainability in everyday life through their food consumption.

#### 4. A toolbox approach

Like a kitchen drawer containing a variety of utensils useful for a multitude of cooking tasks, our toolbox consists of a variety of methods designed to investigate different aspects of domestic food practices. We use the toolbox metaphor to clarify that we propose a range of methods that together can give insight into domestic food practices, and that the researcher can adjust the combination of methods to the research situation (Ehn, Löfgren, and Wilk 2015). We argue that our toolbox approach can improve inclusivity, generate a wealth of different empirical material, and be practical in dealing with the messiness of field work. First, it can improve inclusivity in research because the different methods are designed to support a variety of ways of knowing, and abilities for expressing ideas. While interviews may suit some informants, more participatory methods such as a shop-along may be more appropriate for others. A toolbox approach allows you to choose, or put most emphasis on, a method that fits the informant's way of knowing and expressing. Second, the variety of empirical material gained through different methods in a toolbox approach can more fully capture the richness of human practices and experiences. Using multiple possible combinations of methods allows the researcher to create a rich picture, with multiple layers and complexities, of the research topic (Ehn, Löfgren, and Wilk 2015). As an example, interviewing and mapping exercises, as described later in this article, generate different kinds of empirical material.

Thirdly, the toolbox is a practical approach for dealing with the messiness of field work, because when one or more methods are impossible to use, there are still alternative methods available.

## 5. Inside the toolbox

Below, we present our toolbox, which contains methods used by either one or both of us. The methods have in common that they rely on the visual and the material to broaden the narrative beyond particularities of textual interview questions (Kusenbach 2003; Watson and Meah 2012). They do so by performing one or more of the functions described below. These functions are related and overlapping, but we list them here separately to clarify how the different methods work.

- (1) They bring the *material elements of the studied practice*, such as the shop, or the food, into the research situation. By literally making such objects present in the research situation, the studied practice becomes also more present in the participant's sense-making, as we argued for in Section 2. The materials from the practice also draw the participant's attention to habitual and mundane aspects of everyday practices that otherwise may be easily forgotten or difficult to verbalize (Wills et al. 2016).
- (2) They make use of *association objects* (Harper 2002), such as food objects or a fridge. Association objects support and encourage the participant's narrative. Talking about one's own practices based on one's own food present in the fridge or when and where one buys food can inspire the narrative and encourage participants to base narratives in concrete examples. This can help steer participants away from commonplaces and generalizations that may feature in conventional interviews.
- (3) They make use of *dialogical tools* (Gibbon et al. 2004), e.g., the food. By including these objects in the interview situation, the participant(s) and researcher can find a common, material and visual reference for the narrative. This facilitates explanation, elaboration and probing. While the association object supports the participant's thinking and narrative, the dialogical tool facilitates the conversation between researcher and participant.
- (4) The methods offer a more *interactive* research situation, as the initiative in the interview situation is shifted slightly from the researcher to the participant. Indeed, while the most important trigger for verbalization in semi-structured interviews is the researcher's prompts, in many of our methods it is, for example, food that foremost triggers and carries participants' narratives. Although the interview setting is still staged and directed by the researcher, who has planned the interview and the methods, the participants are given more opportunity to freely associate and steer the conversation into areas they are comfortable talking about. Thus, interactive methods, through e.g., a hands-on activity, may encourage the participant to be more of a co-researcher and not only an informant answering questions. Further, in the "doing", new or unexpected aspects of practices may evolve.

- (5) The methods can be a *tool for reflection and interviewing at a more aggregate level about food practices*, thus providing a bird’s-eye view. Of course, any conscious participation in any research is likely to encourage the participant to think more about what he or she is saying or doing, and of course participants constantly connect and reflect in general. However, methods that result in the participants systematically creating an overview of their consumption, add an extra reflective layer. Seeing an overview of your own practices, e.g., a map of what your everyday routes and routines of food consumption look like (Section 5.2) or a food diary, can create a distance from the specific practices and allow participant and researcher to start discussing patterns and differences.

In all these ways, the toolbox opens up new perspectives on, and understandings of, everyday practices. While the interview forms the cornerstone of both of our fieldwork, we do not discuss the method here, and instead refer to discussions about this method elsewhere (Crang and Cook 2007; Spradley 1979). Interviews can generate a wealth of information; however, the unconscious, embodied and routinized elements of a practice can be difficult for participants to talk about in an interview (Slutskaya, Simpson and Hughes 2012). Therefore, we next explore a variety of methods that can help to come closer to the practice and assist the participants in putting their everyday life experiences into words: fridge stories, food mapping, shop-alongs and food diaries. All of these methods have been used within, before, after or between interviews. Encouraged by the call for a more critical methodological discussion of the food interview (Tellström 2015), we include information about the drawbacks of each method.

### 5.1. Fridge stories

The worst thing is that there are mostly those things in here that should not be in the fridge, because it is the kind of thing we actually never eat. Things that my mom brought with her, for Christmas: I want mustard with the ham. And then I am left with mustard in my fridge [...] I am ashamed about that I cannot resist my parents so well. Still not, even if I am a grown up woman. (Joose 2014, 23)

The excerpt above comes from a – what we term – *fridge story*, an interview or guided tour in which the participant shows and talks about the food items in their fridge, freezer, cupboard, garden and other food storage and production places (Joose 2014; Marshall 2016). The mustard in the fridge – from a multinational brand disliked by the participant – triggered her to talk about the different ideas in her family about consumption and how they deal with this. Occasions – such as in the excerpt above – when participants were slightly embarrassed, initiated unexpected conversation topics, such as identity construction and shameful consumption. This turned out to generate valuable insights into the meaning of everyday food practices. This specific fridge story was relevant for Sofie’s work as it clearly showed the symbolic and socially negotiated nature of food choice.

The fridge story method is sometimes referred to as a (guided) *kitchen tour* (Meah and Watson 2013; Wills et al. 2016). It has similarities with the *kitchen go-along* (Kendall et al. 2016); and also with Watkins’ work (2008), in which she follows the “career” of



refrigerators and their structuring role in our consumption practices. While Watkins focuses on the fridge itself, we investigate the fridge and other storage places as material and bounded spaces of the socially-negotiated outcome of household food choice (Joosse 2014). While using the fridge itself as a subject for research, we foremost used it as a methodological entrance into everyday food practices.

Fridge stories perform four of the functions presented in the introduction to [Section 5](#): The mustard mentioned above is a *material element of the studied practice of food choice*, and as such reminded the participant of the – sometimes easily forgotten or played down – practicalities, social negotiation, and emotions linked to these practices. The mustard also functioned as an *association object* (Harper 2002). As such it triggered the participant to recount the story of the mustard in her fridge, from where she went on to discuss food choice and the emotional and political value it had for her. The mustard story was an easy entrance for her, and a vehicle to talk about her food choice. The fridge functioned as a *dialogical tool* (Gibbon et al. 2004). The participant and researcher both have access to the fridge and its contents as visual reference for the narrative. The researcher can easily probe by asking about the other contents. The research situation becomes more *interactive* as the participant leads the way in his or her own house and takes the initiative about what to present and talk about. The method of fridge stories does not entail that the participant creates an overview of food practices, so it does not function as a tool for reflection on a more aggregate level of food practices.

There can be downsides to this method. A refrigerator can be considered a private place, and part of the “backstage” of consumption. While the method is meant to facilitate conversation, participants may feel as if their consumption is being checked by the researcher. As consumption is not just functional but also social, cultural and symbolic (Bell and Valentine 2013), participants may feel ashamed or even hurt by this method: for example, when people cannot afford to stock up their fridge and pantries, or are troubled by eating disorders. While in both Matilda’s and Sofie’s studies people talked about being embarrassed about their fridge contents or cleanliness, neither of us experienced this as being too sensitive or hurtful for our participants; rather, the experience was a positive one, enabling insights for both the participant and us, as in the mustard story above. This may have to do with the selection of participants: all respondents were interested in food system issues and most were well-off and able to source what they wanted, and accustomed to actively discussing their food choices. In order to avoid the fridge story method being an unwelcome surprise, Sofie announced the fridge stories method in an introductory letter, sent in advance of her visit. She also explained that it was the everyday fridge she was interested in, and therefore asked the participants not to clean, or change their fridge for her visit. Of course, respondents were free to decline showing their fridge, but in our projects all interviewees participated and seemed to enjoy showing and talking about the food in their home.

## 5.2. Food mapping

When I was going out to A. [butcher], then I had to take the bus, put the bike on the bus, then cycle for a mile [a Swedish mile is 10 kilometers] from the bus station, one-way. To then come to the slaughterhouse, toss fifteen kilos of meat on the bike and then back to the bus. And the bus driver . . . I came there out of breath just dragging fifteen kilograms of meat, so it is a bit cumbersome. (Joosse 2014, 25)



The excerpt above comes from – what we term – *food mapping*, a method in which participants mark on a physical or virtual map the places where they source (purchase, grow, receive as a gift, forage etc.) their food, and draw their “food paths”, i.e., the routes they follow to get to these sourcing places (Marte 2007) (see Figure 1). The participants are encouraged to talk about how often they visit these places, what transport they use, with whom, why, etc. During the food mapping, the participant above recounted how she sourced locally produced meat (such as cow and lamb hearts that would otherwise have been thrown away), directly from slaughter, using a low-energy and low-emission means of travel. The exercise triggered her to talk in detail about what she considered to be “good food” (Joose and Hracz 2015) and the practical effort it takes her to source this. This empirical material from food mapping was relevant for Sofie’s work as it demonstrated the practical impact that ideas about good food can have. Other food mappings were insightful, for example, when they showed how food sourcing places were dependent not only on people’s everyday activity spaces, but also their social networks. For instance: on the map, food sourcing places sometimes looked surprisingly far away or inconvenient to Sofie; however, they often turned out to be completely logical for the participants, as they were in the neighborhood while traveling home from work, or while visiting a grandmother in the next town. In general, translating food ideas and practices into spatial patterns generated a lot of extra information and indications for further questioning.

The term “food mapping” resembles Marte’s “foodmaps”; however, while food mapping is an actual mapping exercise, foodmaps are used more broadly for ‘any representational trace related to food produced by a specific person’ (Marte 2007, 263). The mapping exercise has a content purpose, namely to visualize the expanse and distance of food sourcing and through that better grasp the complexity of everyday food practices

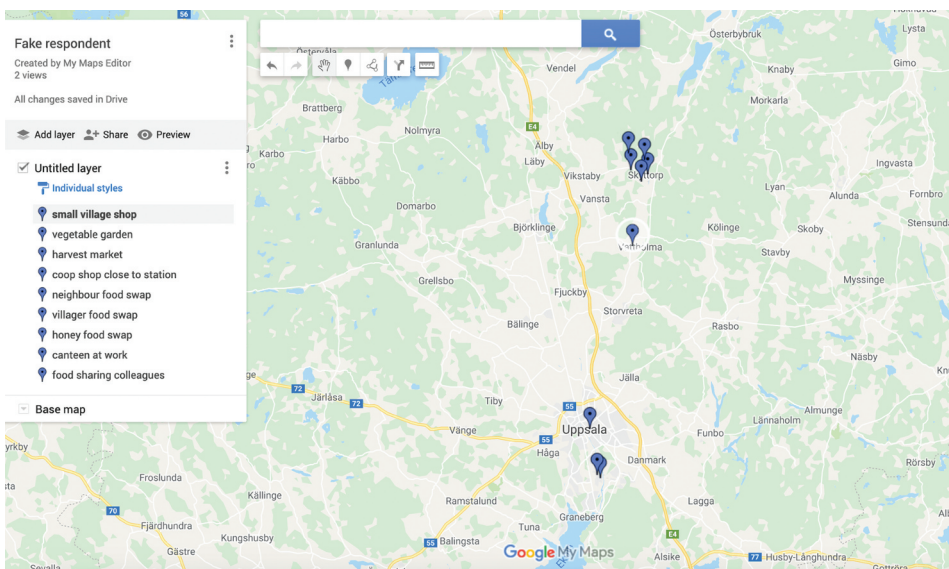


Figure 1. Example of a food map.<sup>2</sup>

and their entanglement in other everyday practices. It also has a methodological purpose, which we describe next.

Unlike fridge stories, food mapping does not forge as direct a link between the interview situation and the practices studied. In the mapping exercise there are no concrete objects that function as *association objects* and no *material elements of the practice* are used for the interview. Still, the mapping exercise is able to create a reminder of the sites and spaces of food sourcing, by their spatial representation on the map, in the interview situation, so helping the participant to reflect and associate. Just as with fridge stories, the food map itself functions as a *dialogical tool*, as this visual representation is made available to both participant and researcher for reflection, common reference and joint discovery. As such, the food map also works as a *tool for reflection on the more aggregate level of food practices*. During the exercise the participant creates an overview of their everyday food practices on the map, making patterns of routines and relationships between practices – normally separated in space and time – more visible for both researcher and participant. It allows a literal bird's eye view of their food sourcing. In several of the interviews this created new knowledge and insights not only for the researcher but also for the participants themselves. Moreover, just like in the fridge stories, the research situation becomes more *interactive* as the participant who is asked to map his/her food takes more control over the direction of the narrative.

Like the fridge stories method, food mapping can also have downsides. The disadvantages we met in our fieldwork had to do with using digital maps on a tablet. We find this technique very convenient, as you can zoom in and out following people's practices to far and unexpected places. However, the digital map requires a certain digital literacy and familiarity, things that not all participants have. One of Sofie's participants felt uneasy with the digital map and asked Sofie to draw her routines for her on the digital map. For situations like this, physical maps are a good alternative, so that the initiative remains more with the participant. Another downside is that personal data is saved on (commercial) online platforms, such as Google Maps. While the homes of the informants were not located exactly on the map, and the maps are only intelligible with the interview transcript, there is still an uneasiness about mapping out people's everyday routes on Google Maps. As Sofie has not yet found a good alternative to Google Maps, she now works with physical maps instead, but continues to look for open source mapping applications that do not archive personal details.

### 5.3. Shop-along

When entering the supermarket where Ulrika<sup>3</sup> normally does the family's grocery shopping, she stresses how she normally first heads for the fridge with organic fruit and vegetables. The family prioritizes organic food and she has in a previous interview mentioned the organic fridge strategy as a means to avoid getting seduced by the cheaper non-organic vegetables. But before reaching the vegs, we stop at the Asian section to pick up some cans for a planned Asian meal. Ulrika points out that on these ample shelves, only the coconut milk has an organic option, which she finds strange (adapted from Marshall 2016, 137).

A shop-along is a form of participant observation where the researcher joins the informant in shopping, a method commonly used in consumer and food studies to gain

insight into mundane practices (Miller 1998; Anving 2012). It resembles the go-along (Kusenbach 2003), in which the participant and researcher walk around in an everyday environment together. Just as Ulrika steered Matilda in the excerpt above, the participants navigate the route and are encouraged to reflect on the experiences and stimuli around them. This allowed Matilda to come closer to experiencing the store in the way the participant did, and gain an understanding of how people make sense of and use commercial foodscapes. The go-along and replication of mundane movements and practices can help the participant to recall memories, values and routines (Kusenbach 2003).

Matilda would join one or more members from the household in their routine food shopping, meeting them at the store, at an agreed location or at their home. She observed their actions, whilst conversing and, in a small notebook, jotted down observations, quotes, chosen or rejected food items, and prices. After the shop-along she would write a detailed narrative. The participants would, often without being prompted, talk through the routes and decision making. A typical remark from the informants, would be explaining why they did *not* choose another “more sustainable” product, such as in the excerpt above. This highlighted for Matilda how different values and practices competed and led to strategies of negotiation and prioritizing different aspects of sustainability (Marshall 2016).

By being in the store, Matilda was able to come closer to the participants’ everyday routines and perceptions, as well as their thoughts whilst doing the grocery shopping; in an interview, these activities and experiences are more difficult to access. The example given above, in the Asian food section, was prompted by the lack of organic options. Placed in the context of the coinciding rapid expansion of organic food range in Sweden and the popularity of Asian food, the reflection about coconut milk reveals contradictions and challenges in everyday shopping for (sustainable) food. The shop-along also invited Matilda to the logistics of the family’s food preferences and how menu planning and personal and cultural tastes were negotiated with perceptions of sustainability (in this case organic food) and infrastructure (store layout and product range). This suggests that the shop-along method has potential to visualize personal and institutional barriers for purchasing, for example, sustainable, ethical or healthy food options.

In contrast to a participant observation in a store, where the researcher observes how people in general act, the shop-along gives a contextual and detailed understanding of how and why certain products are purchased or not, and which aisles of the store are visited or ignored. The shop-along is an *interactive* research situation in which the researcher and participant experience and explore the store and shopping routines together. Hence, the activity triggers a *dialogue* between participant and researcher that can be prompted by *associations* around current and past shopping habits when bringing the *materiality* of the shop and food products into the research situation. Instead of talking about the grocery shopping in an interview in an abstract or detached manner, this method may inspire thoughts and verbalization of the mundane selection of products. Despite its potential to highlight the routines as well as the shopping trolley’s contents, it does not necessarily provide an aggregated view of the participant’s total food purchases.

Ideally, Matilda’s shop-alongs had the aim of joining an ordinary food provisioning activity. However, some advance planning between participant and researcher is

necessary. The shop-along could therefore be perceived as a staged observation, as the presence of the researcher will always have some influence on the situation. Few informants will be used to shopping together with a stranger, so this turns the food shopping into an extraordinary event rather than reenacting an everyday situation.

The method offers some practical challenges. As it can sometimes be difficult to secure participants for a shop-along (Anving 2012), Matilda introduced the research layout with multiple meetings and activities in the initial contact with potential participants, to prepare participants for a longer engagement. All 15 households participated in shop-alongs. However, this required a very flexible schedule, as food shopping often took place at various times and on different days, and could be rescheduled with short notice due to unexpected events. Further, like the fridge stories, the shop-along may be experienced as an intrusion into the participant's intimate sphere, since few people are accustomed to having each choice of food item scrutinized by a spectator. The participant might also be inclined to adjust to perceived desirable shopping behavior, such as buying organic food, and avoid products deemed too private or shameful.

#### 5.4. Food diaries

A food diary is: a collection of receipts (Frostling-Henningsson, Hedbom, and Thuresson 2010); a digital survey (Holm et al. 2016); or a form, booklet or mobile application for registering activities and details about daily food consumption (Ekström 1990). Depending on the scale of the project, the purpose can be to compare and analyze consumption patterns in or between populations or for contrasting consumption practices manifested in interviews. A food diary can range from one day to several weeks of information about food purchases, consumed meals, food waste and/or photographs of consumed meals. A follow-up interview is common in qualitative studies.

Matilda used one-week food diaries in combination with a follow-up interview based on the information in the food diaries (see Table 2). For one week, participants registered food they purchased, threw away and ate at home. The diary also contained a brief instruction and a section for personal reflections. The participants were encouraged to include the item's origin as well as any labels or certifications (e.g., Fairtrade). The logging was done by either filling in the form on paper or by attaching receipts. The purpose of the diaries was to gain input for the interviews, supplementing the shop-alongs and fridge stories. The self-reflection section in particular generated fruitful

**Table 2.** Excerpt from food diary of a family of four (Marshall 2016, 129).

Day	Food	Thrown in ...	Reason	Thrown out by
Monday	2 deciliter (dl) cooked rice	The "food bag"	Stood for too long, unused.	Petter
"	4 cloves of garlic	"	Rotted in the fridge	Petter
"	½ sausage	"	Kids' leftovers	Petter
"	1/8 head of a cabbage	"	Rotted in the fridge	Petter
"	1/5 head of lettuce	"	"	Petter
Tuesday	1 dl mashed potatoes	"	Not eaten by the family	Petter
Wednesday	0,5 dl cooked rice	"	Son's leftovers	Ulrika
Friday	3 dl lentil soup	The sink	Stood in the fridge for too long	Petter
Saturday	1 dl tomato soup	"	Not eaten by Ulrika and Petter	Ulrika
"	1 tbsp. cooked pasta	The "food bag"	Son's leftovers	Ulrika
"	1 tbsp. skin from sausage	"	Daughter's leftovers	Ulrika

conversations, as several participants had documented discussions they had at home or thoughts on their food waste. New perspectives on everyday food consumption were prompted by the participant's own thoughts and experiences, revealing contradictory practices within the households, as well as discrepancies between ideals and practices. For example, the family in the diary excerpt above, had expressed a mutual agreement to prioritize organic food. Normally, Ulrika did the food shopping, but during this particular week, Petter had gone shopping and came home feeling satisfied with being thrifty. His partner was not impressed as there were very few organic groceries and this prompted a discussion between Ulrika and Petter which was later mediated to the researcher.

Whilst the *material elements of the practice* are available for the participant in close relation to the logging, it is not present for the researcher in the follow-up interview. However, since the logging focuses attention on the bought groceries, the consumed dinner, as well as the generated food waste, these can act as *association objects* for the participant. Depending on design, the diary could encourage the documentation of these associations, insights and thoughts in the self-reflection section of the diary. In the follow-up interview then, the food diary itself – through the logging and self-reflection – forms a *dialogical tool*, i.e., common point of reference for the participant and researcher.

The one-week diary gave a wealth of insight into the food consumption of that week but also had drawbacks in its design. These included that the week documented could not be ascertained to be representative for an average week, and that the period of logging was too short to reveal food patterns, routines and habits. As Matilda's participants were free to decide which week to do the logging, no two diaries captured the same week, which added to the difficulty of comparison. Depending on the aim of a study, diaries could be coordinated to capture food practices connected to a specific week or season to give a more comparable data set (Holm et al. 2016; Ekström 1990).

While the previously discussed methods are based on the presence of both participant and researcher, the food diary enables collection of empirical material in the absence of the researcher. The diary moves initiative to the respondent and it is thus *interactive*. Importantly, the diary itself is a reminder of the researcher and the research and prompts the participant to *visualize and reflect on her aggregated food practices* within the frame of the research, which ideally can be deepened in a follow-up interview. The diary, with its accumulated visualization of food purchased and eaten, could potentially have a negative impact on someone with (former) eating disorders. Hence, careful consideration of the purpose, ethics and design of the diary is needed. Further, the participant may, of course, censure or modify the food diary, with the physically absent researcher as audience in mind.

## 6. Discussion

We spent the previous section discussing each method of the toolbox separately. We will now look at them as a group, and discuss how the methods complement, differ and overlap with each other and how they can be used in combination. We start with Table 3, which gives an overview of the five functions of the toolbox linked to each method.

All methods in the toolbox work with dialogical tools and promote interactivity. We can see clear similarities between fridge stories and the shop-along (functions 1,2,3,4),

**Table 3.** The toolbox, the methods and their functions.

	1. Material elements of the studied practice	2. Association prop	3. Dialogical tool	4. Promotes interactivity	5. Reflection on aggregate level
Fridge stories	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Food mapping			✓	✓	✓
Shop-along	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Food diary		(✓)	✓	✓	✓

and the food mapping and the food diary (functions 3,4,5). This shows that while both fridge stories and the shop-along bring the interview in (shop-along) or are closer to the practice and doing (fridge stories), both the detailed reporting of food mapping and the diary instead allow the participant and researcher to explore the patterns and surprises in the more aggregate level of the specific food practices reported. In our work we both combined at least one method that focuses on the immediate practice with a method that can open up for reflection through a collected bird's eye view. Such switching of perspective proved to be helpful in opening up new topics in the interview. For example, these methods prompt discussions based on material or experienced examples of contradicting and conflicting practices amongst different household members, as mentioned in the food diary section. Besides these functions, the methods have different focuses and practicalities that are important to think through when planning to combine them. [Table 4](#) summarizes these.

Each of the methods has a different entry point in the food practices of the participants (see second column of [Table 4](#)). While shop-alongs capture food shopping and fridge stories focus on the current supply of food, food diaries and, to some extent, food mapping are able to show the dynamics of food practices over time. Additionally, the mapping and shop-along methods contextualize the fridge stories by exploring the food's journey to the refrigerator.

In the second column of the table the different kinds of empirical material are listed. While the methods generate both text and image, neither Matilda nor Sofie analyzed the images per se. Instead, we used the audio-recordings of how the participants discussed the fridge, food map etc. The maps and pictures served as a reminder of the interview situation for us during the analysis, and as such supported our text-based analysis. This approach can be changed, depending on the specific research question and method of analysis. In this article we have purposely not discussed analysis of the material. One possible mode to identify practices as well as the meaning-making of them would be a thematic analysis (see Braun and Clarke 2006).

The last three columns list practicalities that are important to consider when combining the methods. Here we focus on the practical differences between the food mapping and the go-along, since they at first sight may seem similar. They differ in at least three aspects: (1) a shop-along focuses on food purchase in a shop, while the mapping exercise may involve all food sourcing; (2) in the mapping exercise the researcher and participant remain situated at the kitchen table, while in the shop-along the researcher comes along in the practice, sees it unfold in real time and meets people and objects on the way. This means that while the mapping exercise gets closer to the practice, it does not get *into* the practice in the way that the shop-along does, and therefore misses out on the daily encounters and the direct experience of the everyday food practices; (3) the mapping

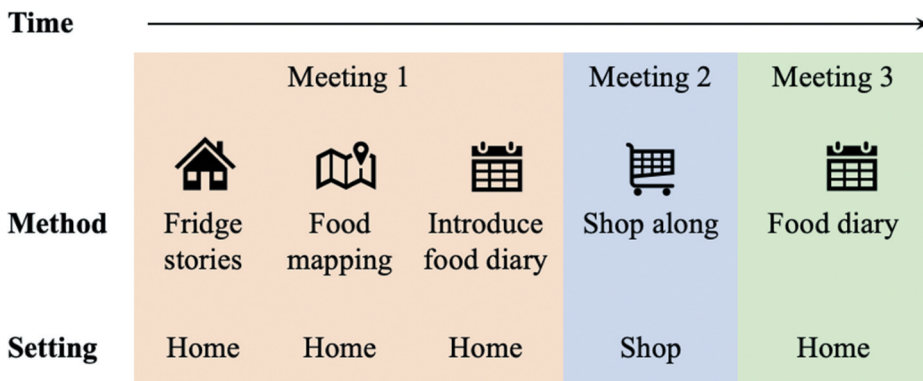


**Table 4.** Overview of entry point, type of empirical material and practicalities of each method.

	Entry to conversation	Empirical material	Setting	Communication	Time
Fridge stories	What sort of (food)? E.g., organic	Audio-recordings, fridge pictures	Kitchen, storage rooms, kitchen garden in participants house	Could be introduced beforehand, e.g., in a letter	Between 15 minutes to 1 hour
Food mapping	Where (do you source your food)?	Audio-recordings, food maps	Flexible	Needs no prior explanation	Between 0,5 to 1 hour
Shop-along	How (do you source your food)?	Notes, narratives	At the shop	Introduce at earlier interview or in a letter	Between 5 minutes to 1 hour or more
Food diary plus interview	What, where and when (food was bought, eaten and thrown-away) and by who?	Tables, personal written reflections	Flexible	Introduce during an earlier meeting and discuss results after the diary taking	From 1 day up to 1–2 weeks depending on aim

exercise is less time-demanding, which makes it easier to organize and for participants to commit to.

While the methods in general are not complex in themselves, they do pose organizational challenges such as joining a shopping activity or being present in the participant's home. The food diary requires an introduction to the exercise, and a follow-up discussion afterward. As such, using the methods from the toolbox will probably require scheduling several meetings with the research participants. This demands organization and good communication. The people we contacted were busy and sometimes had to reschedule or cancel because "things came up". That of course takes extra time. However, for such in-depth research with multiple meetings one can have fewer participants, which means that you save time in making first contacts. A flow chart could be helpful, for both researcher and participants, to visualize the methods, their timing and location (see [Figure 2](#)).

**Figure 2.** Example of a flow chart.



We have discussed above the methods of the toolbox together, but what does the toolbox as a whole have to offer? We argue that the toolbox can help capture the complexity and dynamic nature of practices better than single-method approaches. We also believe it is worthwhile to consider as a complement or alternative to a combination of interviews and participant observation. We argue that the toolbox offers something different than interviews or participant observations. While interviews target sense-making about the studied practice, and participant observation targets the practice itself, our (combination of) methods is specifically designed to make the studied practice more present in the interview and bring the elements of the interview and participant observation usefully together (see also Phillips and Waitt 2018).

While we recommend striving for uniform application across participants, the toolbox approach can offer a flexibility to researchers: some methods will fit participants and circumstances better than others. Following this approach the researcher may end up with diverse empirical material, e.g., not all participants doing all methods. This need not be problematic for the analysis. Through focusing on methods that fit the participant best, we find that the lack of sameness is made up for by a richness of material, as the method is projected to better deliver insights. Together, the materials provide both snippets and detailed narratives of how everyday life is practiced. Each method contributes with its own spotlight or lens, that allows different perspectives and entrance points to the practices (cf. Ehn, Löfgren, and Wilk 2015). In the analysis phase – in the coding and theoretical exploration – these practices are then scrutinized to highlight and understand e.g., the sociocultural relations, norms and infrastructures that guides or food related practices.

In the article we have touched on ethical considerations in relation to privacy and health. The question of ethics is especially relevant for the food mapping, which captures and fixes people's everyday food practices on a map. It is therefore of great importance to anonymize the individual participants. However, perhaps the whole toolbox, and ethnography in general, could be seen as intruding into people's private spheres. An important point to understand is, however, that our research and analysis does not focus on specific individuals but instead on practices and the socio-material context encouraging or complicating certain practices. It is important to further discuss the ethical dimensions of studying domestic food practices (see e.g., Jönsson 2012).

## 7. Conclusion and future explorations

With an increased interest in the study of everyday life and food consumption, there is a need to discuss relevant methods and methodologies. In this article, we have suggested a toolbox including four different methods to help to come closer to domestic food practices. The toolbox is not definite or exhaustive; our idea is that the toolbox can be used creatively, selecting and combining methods that can help answer your research question, and adding your own methods, e.g., symbol elicitation (Harper 2002) or other forms of visual ethnography (Pink 2013). We have introduced five functions of the toolbox and suggest that they can help to think through how to combine methods for the specific research purposes of individual projects.

The toolbox aims to provide a variety of tools, each highlighting different aspects of domestic food consumption, which taken together can help to explore the context, social aspects, dynamics and complexity of everyday food practices (Ehn, Löfgren, and Willk 2015). The toolbox can be further developed and discussed, e.g., to include other social (and digital) domains in the study of domestic food practices. Indeed, domestic food practices are not only socially formed inside the household, but also outside, for example in study circles (Stigzelius 2017). Moreover, food practices increasingly take place online: consumers buy products through the internet (Weinswig 2018), and many resort to blogs, Facebook and YouTube for inspiration and discussion on food and consumption (Joose and Brydges 2018; Joosse and Hrac 2015). To capture this multi-site complexity of everyday food practices, additional methods or adjustments of existing methods may be relevant. The online consumer presence also offers possibilities for digital methods for studying household practices (Kendall et al. 2016; Wills et al. 2016), such as apps to register everyday consumption.

Another direction we suggest is to adjust the go-along to other food activities. Beside the shop-along, a “cook-along” (Martín 2018), a “forage-along” and “fish-along” could be relevant to develop. Also, letting the participants guide the researcher through commonly used web pages and apps through a “scroll-along” (Ljung 2018), e.g., Instagram and social media used for meal inspiration and planning, may enable a closer contact with insight into people’s online food encounters, relations and habits.

## Notes

1. While we use practice theory to explain our basic point of departure, the methods presented in Section 4 do not exclude the application of other theoretical and analytical perspectives. We agree with Shove that there are no particular methods linked to particular theories per se, but that the choice of methods rather depends on the specific research question (Shove 2017).
2. The maps can be done in different ways depending on the specific research question, for example: while this map just has place markers, maps in another research project included the routes of everyday life to get to these places, with information on what kind of transport and with whom the trip was undertaken.
3. All names are pseudonyms.

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