

# Table Topics

## The Role of Information in Family Dinners

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### Abstract

This paper addresses the research question: what is the role of information in family dinners? Using Sonnenwald, Wildemuth, & Harmon's (2001) Information Horizon Interview framework and methodology, the author gathered data from three individuals on the role of information in the planning of family dinners and family meals themselves. Semi structured interviews and an Information Horizon mapping exercise were used to help participants better reflect on the information present around their family dinners. Findings indicate family meals are sources of information in and of themselves, being rich information grounds and sites of information exchange. One family member is generally the central organizing force behind all family meals and the go between for information surrounding the planning of that meal. The internet is also listed as a key resource in the planning of family meals. This study concludes families are rich grounds for the study of information behaviour and that information is very much present in family dinners.

### INTRODUCTION

"A family that eats together stays together", that's how the saying goes. Even Homer Simpson persuades his family to the dinner table saying "We're not going to shovel food in our mouths while we stare at the TV. We're going to eat at the dining room table like a normal family" (Jean, A., & Reiss, A., 1990). While this "normal activity" plays an important role in many households, very little study has been done on the information behaviour surrounding family dinners. Using Sonnenwald, Wildemuth, & Harmon's Information Horizon theoretical framework this study addresses this gap by focusing on the question: what is the role of information in family dinners? While initially addressing the role of information in the planning of family dinners, this study was adapted due to participants focusing more on the family dinners themselves. Additionally, the sensitizing concept of the politics of family meals and the interactions between family members while planning meals was adapted to an understanding of information resources inherent in family meals as well as those used in their planning. Family consisted of immediate family and family dinners referred to regular or semi regular meals attended by immediate family. This paper will first give a brief review of the current literature on families in Library and Information Science (LIS), before presenting an overview of research methods and findings. A discussion of the findings will follow with a review of the methodology used.

### LITERATURE REVIEW

A sub field of LIS, information behavioral theories seek to understand how people interact with and use information (Information Behaviour Theories, 2015). A survey of LIS literature very little focus on the role of information with regards to families.

Libraries in the United States have engaged underserved families and connected them with library resources through summer meal programs (Cole & Chamberlain, 2015, p. 22). This has also helped encourage local leadership, youth development, community bonds while increasing the visibility of libraries (Cole & Chamberlain, 2015, p. 22). However, this study doesn't address the actual information behaviour of these families.

Fulton mentions the importance of family members as information sources in her discussion of the use of information sharing among amateur genealogists (2009, p. 762). She looks at how information sharing and reciprocal altruism can strengthen community bonds and relationships between individuals providing social support and information sources (Fulton, 2009, p. 766). This is done through information sharing and acquisition using information resources such as the internet and family members (Fulton, 2009, p. 762). However, while family members are recognized as important information resources, the focus of this paper is on amateur genealogists.

Barriage & Searles, on the other hand, studied how young girls from 3 to 6 make sense of their world through information seeking behaviour in the family interactions

(2015, “Abstract”). They discovered that the majority of information seeking was in reaction to family conversations and action and that very few information seeking behaviours were unrelated to the family (Barriage & Searles, 2015, “Discussion”). This demonstrates the rich information behaviour of families and the information exchange inherent in relationships. Even less LIS literature shifts this focus from the information behaviour of families to the role on of information in family meals.

K. Lewin discusses family meals in his gatekeeping network theory where he describes how the mother or wife, as a gatekeeper, is the person who decides the food that will be on the dinner table (1947, pp. 144-146), but even this doesn’t provide an in-depth study of the role of information in these family meals. This gap undervalues the importance of families in information use and sharing and begs further study of their information behaviours.

**RESEARCH METHODS**

This exploratory research study was conducted using the Information horizon theoretical framework and methodology create by Sonnenwald, Wildemuth, & Harmon (2001). This framework looks at human information seeking behaviour in context with a focus on when and why people access people and information resources; the relationships among these resources; the dynamic nature of information resources; and the importance of context and situation (Sonnenwald, 2005, pp. 191). A sample population of three individuals was chosen based on the criteria of having regular or semi regular family meals. In an effort to be as representative as possible, two women and one man were chosen, with each occupying different positions in the planning of family meals. One woman was a 29 year old student studying away from home who commuted for family meals. The second woman (62) and the man (71) are married with three children. Only one child remains at home, the other two having moved out. The man is the cook of the family, but the woman is involved in the planning process. Each identified as having semi-regular casual family dinners.

An interview guide (see Appendix: Fig 1) was used to conduct semi-structured interviews with each participant during which they drew an “information horizon map”. This map forms part of Sonnenwald, Wildemuth, & Harmon’s methodology and asks participants to outline the various information resources and people they access in the context of the research question (Sonnenwald, 2005, pp. 195), in this case the role of information in family dinners. Participants were also encouraged to talk as they drew and follow up questions were asked for further details. Data from the interviews and maps was then placed in an excel spreadsheets with information resources placed in rows and participants in columns. From this patterns and themes were gleaned for further analysis and discussion.

**FINDINGS**

**Method of Analysis**

The findings for this study were analysed using inductive thematic analysis as allows the data to speak to the researcher who pulls out patterns and themes from the aggregate (IHI Data Analysis & Final Deliverable, J. Hartel, personal communication, Oct 30, 2017). It is used in this paper as a means of explaining and synthesizing the data because it provides greater flexibility and allows the data to speak to the researcher rather than being constrained to a particular model or viewpoint. Clear patterns and themes became evident in the organization of the data prompting further exploration. As indicated by the literature review, family dinners are also relatively understudied in LIS suggesting the possibility of information resources and behaviours that aren’t currently accounted for. Inductive thematic analysis therefore offers more opportunity to explore the themes that have surfaced in this research.

**Table Talk**

Three major themes were found when reviewing collected data. First of all, all participants listed family meals themselves as a key source of information. Family dinners and the process of putting them together were described as an opportunity to chat and touch base with their family. For all, family meals were the most common means of seeing their family on a regular basis as family members lived in different locations. Jean in particular drew concentric circles representing information in her world as all coming back to the dinner table (Fig 1).

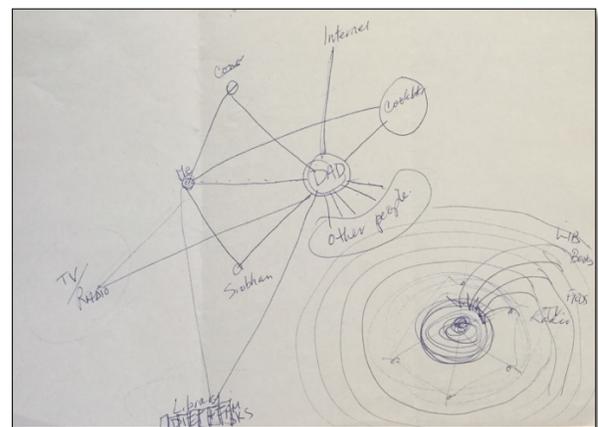


Figure 1. Jean’s Information Horizon Map

And when discussing the atmosphere at family meals said:

Usually, it's usually, there's a lot of talk and communication, a lot of discussion about what's happening in the world or what's happening in our lives. I'd say it's a good, a positive sort of a... And it's also a place where, you know, you can talk about problems that we have, y'know stuff like that, so yeah....

The family meal and its preparation then becomes an information pool where information is brought to the table, pooled and exchanged between family members.

**Gatekeeper**

The second common theme between participants was the centrality of one family member as a source organization and of information about family meals. Each participant described the cook as the go between for all organization of family meals and the person making all the major decisions. Jean talked about how there were consultation between family members about what to have for dinners, but the cook ultimately made the decision. Lotus referenced this same theme when discussing how the decision of whether meals would be at home or at a restaurant was made by the cook:

“depending on really how my mom’s feeling we will either go out and eat, which I think we’ve been doing more of, or it’ll be at my parents house and then we’ll just kinda come and eat.”

She also described how the organization of the meal all centered around her mother:

“for me it’s me like telling my Mom, like I’m gonna be home on this day this weekend and then I think she’ll kind of do the... like she’ll contact my brother and be like hey, your sister’s coming home are you gonna be around then”

On his map James, who identified himself as the family cook, placed himself as central to the process of planning family dinner and described how he will consult others, but by default he is the one who makes the decision.

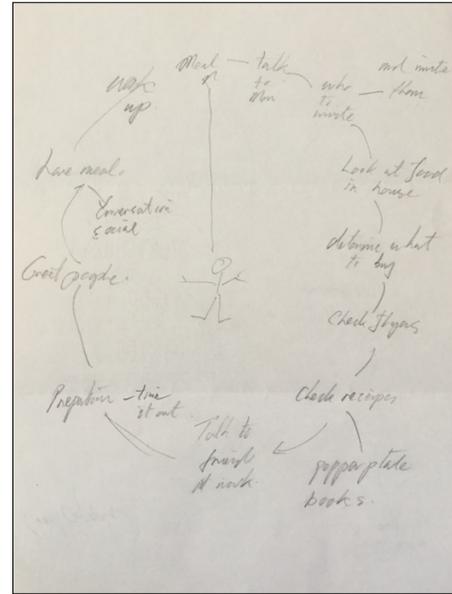


Figure 2. James’ Information Horizon Map

In this sense family meals tend to revolve around one individual, who becomes a major information source for everyone else in the planning of the family meal.

**Internet**

Finally, the third theme between participants was the role of the internet as an important information resource family in planning family meals. Recipes, information for family discussions, decisions about having family meals, flyers, communication between family members, maps for restaurants, all of these resources were accessed through the internet. Lotus, when ranking what was most important for the planning of family meals chose her the internet through the medium of her phone: “the internet is the key to everything”.



Figure 2. Lotus' Information Horizon Map

James and Jean both mentioned using it to find recipes and James in particular uses the internet to keep track of his recipes through an online database called Pepperplate. So, a lot of the necessary resources used for family meals and their planning are internet based.

## DISCUSSION

This study demonstrates that family meals are rich sources of information exchange. In many ways the family meals act as information grounds. Fisher describes information grounds as places where people come together for a specific purpose and end up creating social atmosphere where the impromptu and serendipitous sharing of information takes place (2005, pp. 185). Family meals very much emulate this with members coming together to share meal, but at the same time having conversation and touching base leading to information sharing. This is also really similar to Fulton's description of information sharing among hobbyist genealogists and the how it strengthens community bonds (Fulton, 2009, p. 766). By exchanging information, families are renewing their relationships and providing support to each other. In this sense family dinners actually act as information resources for family members and are rich sources of information exchange.

The idea of one family member as gatekeeper is another interesting pattern present in participant interviews. While all members are involved one way or another in the planning of family dinners, this individual is the fulcrum of it all. A similar pattern is found in gatekeeper network theory where gatekeepers were described as people who filtered information in and out while acting as an information link to the outside (information, goods, news or people) (Barzilai-Nahon, K., 2005 pp. 248). Lewin uses

this to explain the choice of food for family meals (1947, pp. 144-146), but could be easily applied to the planning of family dinners. In this sense one particular family becomes an information resource for all other family members. Further exploration could indicate whether this theme is common among other families or if it's particular to certain family makeups. Its also interesting to note though that Lewin identified the wife or mother as the central figure, both father and mother were described as the gatekeeper in different families (1947, pp. 144-146). A study of how changing social norms have affected the role of information gatekeeper might be interesting.

In the planning of family dinners, the internet actually acts as a personal information collection. Bruce defines a personal information collection as the collection of information sources and channels we first turn to for a task or an interest we are pursuing (2005, "Personal Information Collections"). James describes keeping his recipes in Pepperplate and having certain sites he checks for recipes. Lotus refers to google maps when trying to find restaurants for family dinners, and Jean also lists it as a key resource for recipes. It's quite interesting to note how many sources have been blended into the internet reducing several information resources into one channel of collective information. But also, that the internet is not the foremost in the minds of participants, rather acting as scaffolding underlying the planning of dinners. Further studies on how this has changed information seeking behaviour would be beneficial.

## METHODOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS

The IHI method used for this has many benefits in terms of a guideline and template for the possibility of replication while offering enough flexibility to elicit varied perspectives. The drawing exercise sometimes causes difficulty as people are unsure what to draw and seek direction which can tamper with the results. Participants were particularly unsure as to what was meant by information resources and required further prompting based on responses given in their interviews. The broad nature of the starting questions also led to broader responses that veered further from the research question. The method also lends itself better to smaller samples sizes which create difficulties in terms of generalizing results. This particular study was hardly representative especially considering two participants were from the same family and studies should be done with larger sample sizes to explore this area further.

## CONCLUSION

As demonstrated by this study families are rich grounds for the study of information behaviour and it is clear that information is very much present in family dinners. This study has found three interesting themes have emerged

which show the rich information environment present around family dinners. Family dinners often evoke conversations which become grounds for information sharing and exchange. This then acts as an important information resources for families. The flow of information around family dinners is also often concentrated in one individual who organizes and disseminates information surrounding family dinners. This trend might present an interesting subject for future study surrounding information behaviour in families. Finally, families have not escaped the reach of the world wide web and it has become a key resource in planning and putting together family meals. Whether this has changed family dynamics and behaviour would be an interesting subject for further study. In short, the role of information in family dinners is that of information resources in various guises, whether people, groups or the internet. Each of these areas offer rich opportunities for further exploration and would be great subjects for further study. And by studying Homer Simpson's "normal activity" (Jean, A., & Reiss, A., 1990) we can discover the range of intricacies and networks that carefully construct the delicate family information network. I hope that with further study, the full beauty of this everyday activity and be made visible to the broader world.

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## **AUTHOR'S BIO**

*Ciara O'Kelly (ciara.okelly@mail.utoronto.ca) is a graduate student at the University of Toronto's Faculty of Information where she is pursuing her master's in Library Science and Archival and Records Management. She has a background in Political Science and French with a particular focus on the status of French Canadians in Canada. Outside her academic studies she has an interest in culture, language and minority revitalization, particularly with regards to the Irish language and culture.*

## **APPENDIX 1: Interview Guide**

Could you tell me about family dinners?

- How do you define family? Who comes?
  - Regular, semi regular, holidays only?
  - What made you decide to hold a family dinner?
  - Is it always at the same place?
1. Can you tell me about a recent time you brought everyone together for a family dinner?
    - Who did you ask along? Why?
    - How did you decide where it was to be held?
    - How did you decide who was bring what?
    - Were there any difficulties?
  2. How do you go about planning your family dinners?
    - What is the step by step process of planning your dinner?
    - How do you let other people know? How do you decide who comes?
    - What resources are important in the planning process?
    - What factors are involved in your decisions?
  4. Information Horizon Map  
Could you draw what we're referring to as an information horizon or information horizon map. Put yourself on this piece of paper, and then draw in all the information resources or people you access when planning family dinners. Please talk about it as you're drawing it.
    - Do you use any other resources?
    - Why do you go to this one before/after this one?
    - Do any of these suggest information to you?
    - Previously you mentioned ---- would you include them in your map? Why (not)?

## **APPENDIX 2: Interview Quotes**

### **Quote 1**

Interviewer: What made you decide that you wanted to have family dinners as a group?

Jean: I've always felt its important to have family dinners. For one you eat better if you eat at home and eat together as a family. It also helps connect the family, keep them connected. It helps people know whats going on with everyone else. Helps children develop good conversational skills and awareness about whats happening in the world and stuff and manners and politeness and all those things so I think it's a real good learning ground for families. And a place to connect as well.

### **Quote 2**

Interviewer: So its not just being together with each other, but its also trying to share in that heritage, if that makes sense?

Jean: Yeah, and I think its um... For your Dad, here's what I think it is. I think feeding someone is how he shows he cares. That a really big thing.... I think as he was growing up his mother giving him food was really important to him and that's the way that he shows that he cares about other people is by fixing food so I think that that's really important to him.

Well, the whole health issue is another aspect of it y'know through the years we've always kept... tried to keep various kinds of healthy food and make sure that our table reflects that. And your Dad's been quite careful about cooking stuff that is healthy y'know, doesn't just throw on a bunch of fatty meat and cheese and stuff like that, he looks at what's healthy and tries to make healthy meals as well.

And of course, economy is another piece of it, he's got to have got the food that's cheapest (laughs). Well, he's very proud if can say that he got the... that the price of the food that he has cooked is a deal, y'know.

### **Quote 3**

Interviewer: How do you go about planning your family dinners?

Lotus: Hmmm... I would say it's more... I don't know what happens from other people's point of view, but for me it's me like telling my Mom, like I'm gonna be home on this day this weekend and then I think she'll kind of do the... like she'll contact my brother and be like hey, your sister's coming home are you gonna be around then. And then my Dad is just there so he'll be there. Yeah, so I feel like someone will.... Or if there's some kind of like event like you know a birthday or something, then... I think everyone just goes through my mother and be like...

### **Quote 4**

Interviewer: Is there anything else you'd like to add?

Lotus: No. All I know is that like saying this out loud made me realize I should do more family dinners cause I think I've just never thought about that. And then maybe I should plan them for my Mom cause I feel bad that I'm making her do everything (laughs). So yeah!

**Quote 5**

Interviewer: Can you tell me about a recent time you brought everyone together for a family dinner?

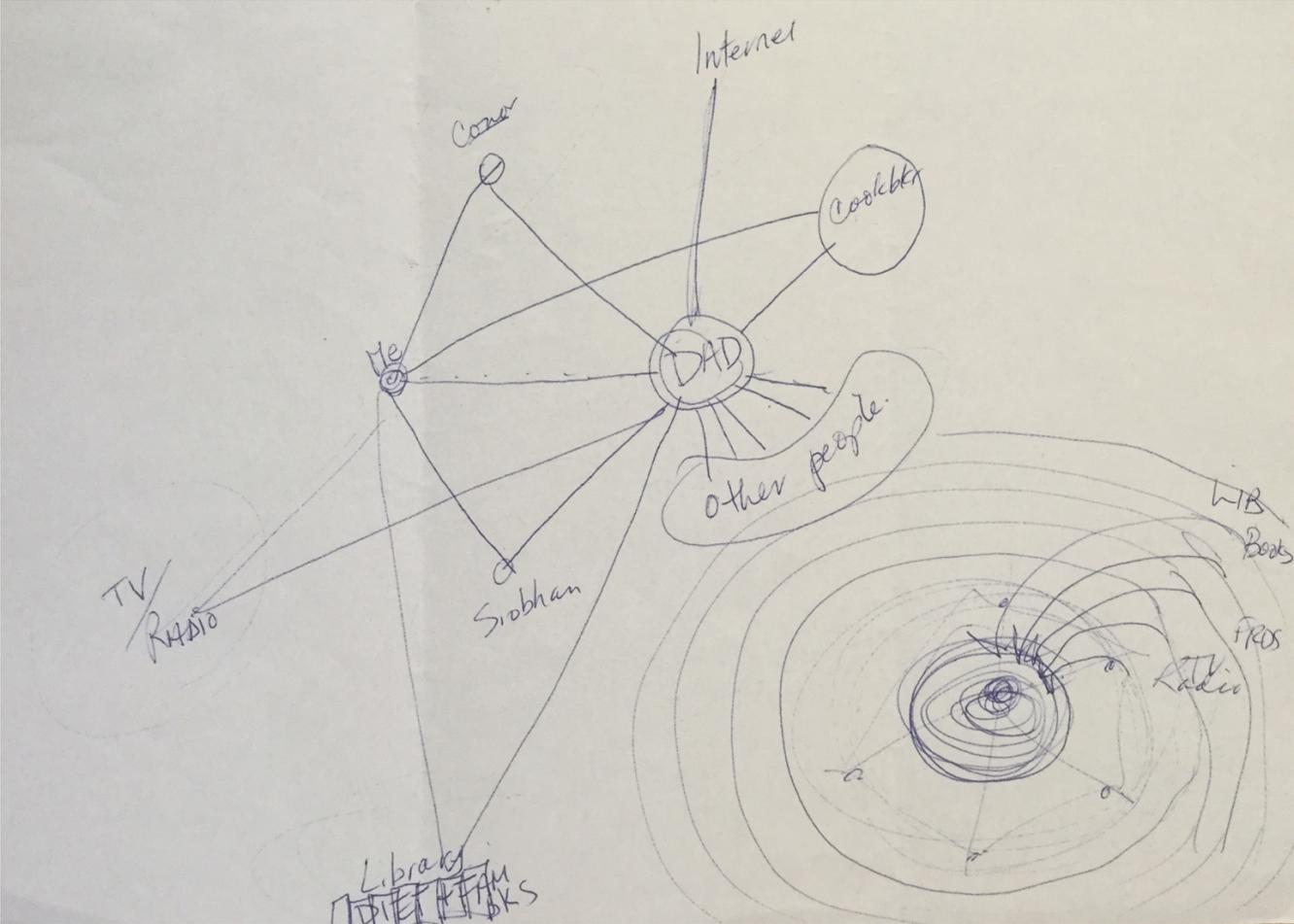
James: Well, the last one I can think of. Remember the night you came back from Ireland. Like Christmas Eve. Like that was a good example. Where Conor and I, we prepared the meal while you guys were at the airport, while Mammy and Siobhan were at the airport picking you up. And he and I sat in the kitchen, he played music that he thought I would like, which was really interesting, it was a French group, can't remember the name of the group now. But, that was nice. And then we made those burritos which we'd never made before, we didn't know what they'd turn out like, but they were a huge success. They were a lot of work. So we had that and I think we might have had a few other things as well. Y'know... we used to.... We used to buy storebought stuff, but we decided to make something instead that night, and it was a great night.

**Quote 6**

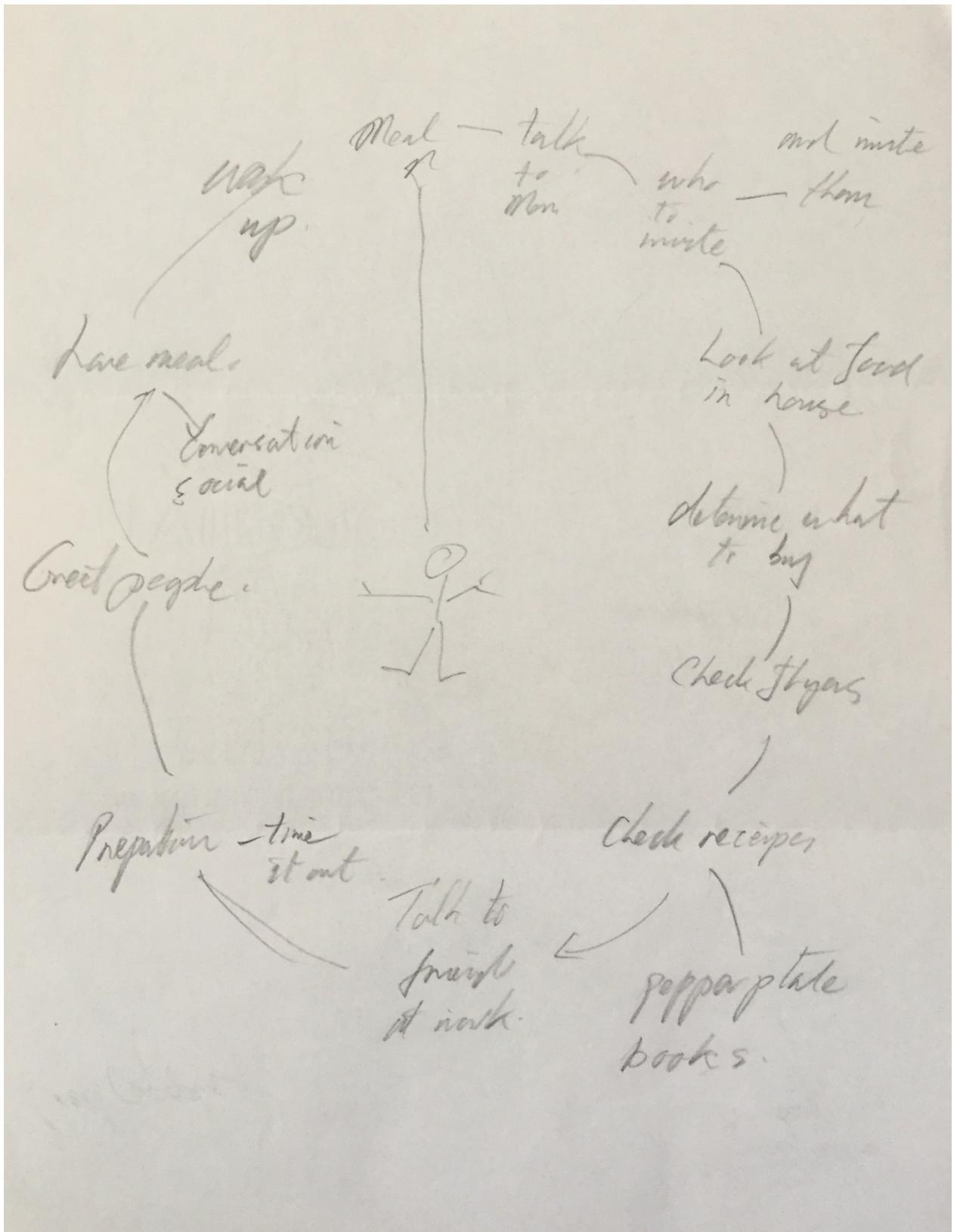
Interviewer: Were you taught to cook or did you just...

James: Not really, no. But I watched my mother in the kitchen. I knew pretty much a lot of the stuff she did. But I could never replicate it. Her's always taste better.

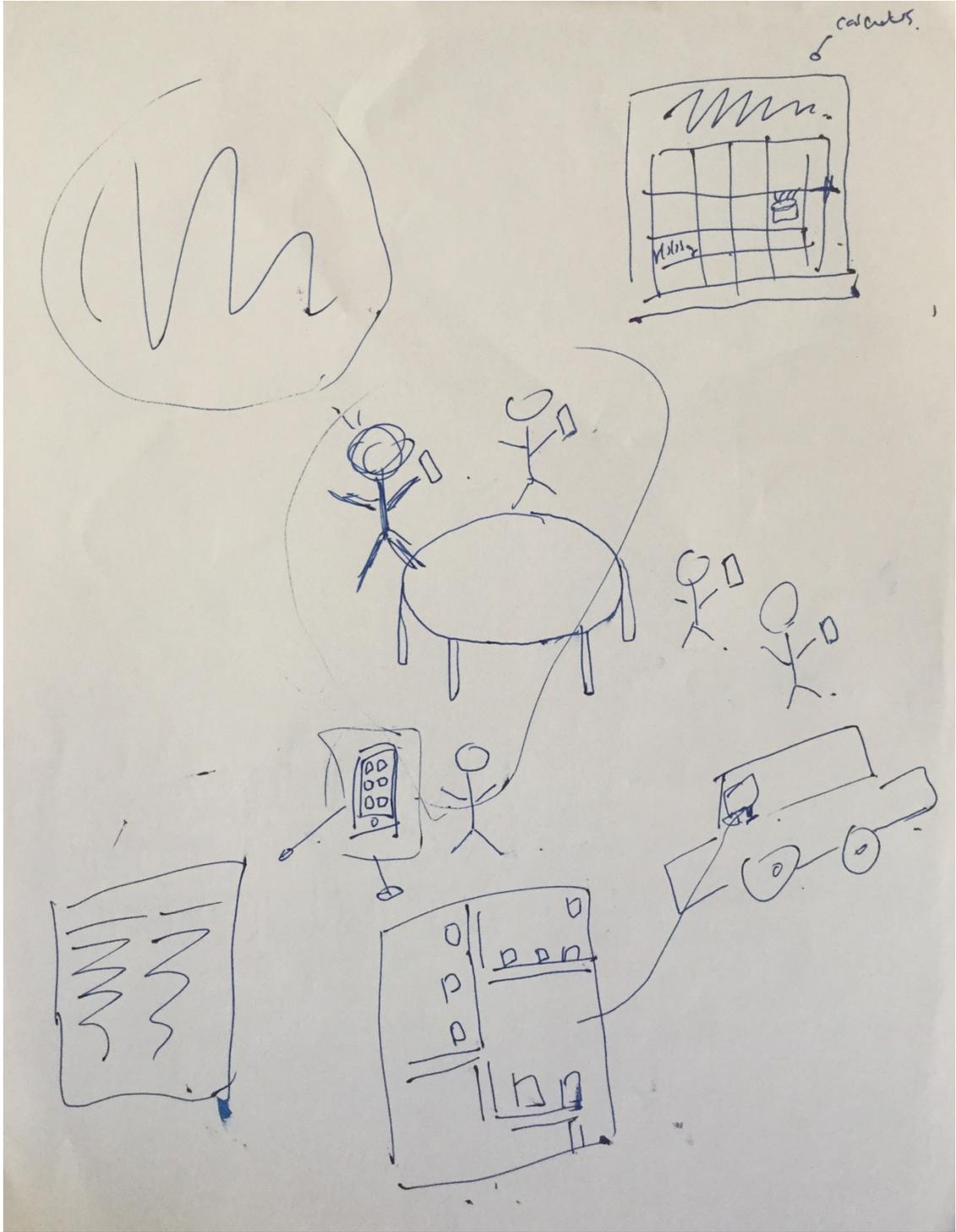
**APPENDIX 3: Information Horizon Maps**



Jean's Information Horizon Map



James' Information Horizon Map



Lotus' Information Horizon Map