In order to cast light on various aspects of eating out and entertaining at home with food, Warde and Martens (2000) interviewed 33 principal food providers in 30 households in the Preston area, England, in 1994. Apart from conducting interviews, they also carried out a questionnaire survey involving approximately 1000 people drawn from London, Bristol and Preston (three cities in England). With regard to entertaining people with a meal at home, Warde and Martens (2000) state:

Either explicitly or implicitly, most interviewees drew upon a cultural template of a dinner party against which their own social practices were described ... [The middle-class dinner party] is a highly structured event which includes an elaborate menu, a prescribed set of rituals, a particularly defined set of companions whose patterns of interaction are set out, and an injunction of exceptional care and attention on the part of the host and gratitude on the part of the guest. (p. 57)

Their interviewees suggest that the meal should have at least three courses and that these would be more special than those eaten on an everyday basis. Warde and Martens (2000) suggest that while the template for the dinner party seems to be universally held, few people follow it to the letter.

They estimated the incidence of dinner parties in their sample, on the basis of a strict definition (a meal with three or more courses, lasting two or more hours), as follows:

Dinner parties so defined occurred on only 15 per cent of all occasions of hospitality. The proportion changes if different conditions are set, of course. Relaxing the criteria by allowing all meals with two or more courses lasting an hour or more gives a proportion of
52 per cent. Dinner parties are not the most common manner of entertaining guests. *Improvisation on the cultural template is the norm.* (emphasis added) (pp. 60–1)

Although there are many interesting questions raised in Warde and Martens’s (2000) data which deserve to be followed up through further interview and survey studies, I have chosen not to go down that path here. I adopt an idiographic research stance, based upon participant observation (see Preface). While I do not seek to emphasise autobiographical experience, I shall not shun from reporting it where appropriate. Although a dinner party invites the analysis of interpersonal interaction at the dinner table, this is not where I place the emphasis in my study. Instead, I adopt a skills and planning focus for my observations on the cooking and preparation, leaving the social psychology to one side.

The episode that I chose to study was a dinner party, planned for eight persons, at my home. The guests were two of my research students, together with a new member of staff (and their partners). In the event, only my research students and partners were able to attend, thus making four guests on the night. Although this dinner party follows the standard template described by Warde and Martens (2000) reasonably closely (see above), it will be seen that serious disruptions (of an entirely agreeable nature) act to force an improvisation into the unfolding episode after the main course has been eaten. I shall say no more for the present; I now provide a brief note on the way in which I collected data for the case study.

The analysis is based upon approximately 8000 words of research notes. These notes were typed up from hand-written notes jotted down on a reporter’s pad (e.g. while cooking in the kitchen). Additional material based upon memory was also added into the research record while typing up. The typing-up of notes always occurred as soon as possible after the events, usually within the same day. Limitations of space prevent me from presenting these notes in full: I shall, however, provide as many extracts from these data as possible.

**A-priori Hierarchical Analysis of the Dinner Party Episode**

Kirwan and Ainsworth (1992) recommend that hierarchical task analysis should not be carried out by first collecting data, since this is likely to result in a mass of unstructured information. In an idiographic study, such as this (in terms of the number of dinner party episodes,