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Book review: Families and Food in Hard Times by Rebecca O'Connell and Julia Brannen
Elisabeth Garratt, Sheffield Methods Institute, University of Sheffield

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Manuscripts

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3 Book review: Families and Food in Hard Times by Rebecca O'Connell and Julia Brannen
4 Elisabeth Garratt, Sheffield Methods Institute, University of Sheffield
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7 *'I skip my meal to wait for [mother] to come back and at least we can have the same amount*
8 *of food ... [We] starve together through the whole day, so at least we will have had*
9 *something to eat'* (page 224). 15-year-old Amara lives in a London hostel with her mother,
10 who cannot claim benefits for immigration reasons. Amara is not alone in these
11 experiences: Portuguese 12-year old Bianca explains how *'This month I won't ask for much*
12 *[food]'* when she sees that supplies are running low, while Norwegian Rebeka, aged 14,
13 describe how *'We can't eat whatever we want. No, we can't eat yoghurt if we already have*
14 *eaten one that day, only when it is our first'*. Such accounts bring to life the human
15 experiences of poverty and food provisioning in times of extreme scarcity, from parents
16 who did not eat for *'days at a time'* to children making excuses for limiting their own social
17 lives for lack of funds, such as 14 year-old migrant to Norway Antonio, who rejected the
18 *'unhealthy'* (and unaffordable) fast food outlets frequented by his friends.
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23 The ambitious scope of *Families and Food in Hard Times* – the culmination of a £1 million
24 European Research Council grant – is matched only by the quality, depth and detail of the
25 accounts it describes. The research contrasts the UK, Portugal, and Norway to illustrate and
26 compare the legacy of the 2008 financial crisis on nations defined by austerity (the UK),
27 bailout (Portugal), and the welfare state (Norway). It takes a cross national, comparative
28 mixed-methods case study design to explore the dynamics of food provisioning in poverty at
29 three levels: national, neighbourhood and household. Secondary analyses of the EU
30 Statistics on Income and Living Conditions provide quantitative context to underpin in-depth
31 interviews with 133 households. This work is distinguished by its sheer breadth,
32 encompassing topics from food provisioning on a low income, help seeking, responsibility
33 for food work, and the material, social, and emotional consequences of food poverty,
34 resulting in a richly textured account of food provisioning among European families with
35 children.
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40 The book is meticulously researched to expertly contextualise participants' individual
41 experiences within the economic and social context. For example, we learn how Maggie, a
42 lone British mother who is unable to work due to mental health problems, scrapes by
43 through a blend of formal support from statutory and third-sector agencies, and informal
44 financial help from neighbours in exchange for cleaning, childcare, and other *'good deeds'*.
45 In this way, the book valorises participants' agency without diminishing its place within the
46 structural constraints of different country contexts.
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50 By interviewing parents and their 11-15 year-old children, the book enables a complete and
51 sometimes contradictory account of familial food experiences. For example, British 15 year-
52 old Bryony reported going without meals despite her lone mother's painstaking
53 economising strategies and insistence that her two teenagers are well fed. The approach
54 also reveals young people's acute awareness of their parents' sacrifices, such as ten year-old
55 Ana from Portugal's concern *'Because I know my mother [and my father] face hardships ...*
56 *and I also wanted to be grown up to help them.'*
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3 The title also advances our knowledge of the topic in key ways. The incorporation of race
4 shines a light onto previously underexplored dimensions of food poverty. The dynamics of
5 racism manifest in different ways in the three settings, with the detailed qualitative
6 approach revealing how race both increases the risk of food poverty and stymies attempts
7 to mitigate this experience.
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10 While the book interviews both parents and children, the voices of fathers or other men are
11 strikingly absent. Here, the authors here are continuing a tradition of interviewing women
12 about food provisioning dating back to Pember Reeves' seminal research in 1913. If indeed
13 no male caregivers were involved in this way, I would like more critical reflection on the
14 gendered nature of food provisioning and continued absence of men in this activity.
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17 The authors skilfully identify features of the social, economic, and policy terrain that
18 contribute to food poverty in the study countries, such as difference in the availability,
19 quality, and cost of school meals. By focusing on such details, the book has potential to
20 inform rigorous evidence-based policy recommendations. This would ideally have been a
21 more prominent focus for the book and could enhance engagement from those with
22 political influence, and I would have liked greater emphasis here.
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26 Notwithstanding these minor limitations, which ought not to distract from its considerable
27 contribution to understanding the material, social, emotional consequences of food
28 poverty, the book is highly readable, making it accessible to undergraduate and
29 postgraduate students. It will no doubt become an influential title for readers across
30 disciplines including sociology, human geography, and public health.
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