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C&S editorial

Children's and Young People's Food Practices in Contexts of Poverty and Inequality

Wendy J. Wills and Rebecca O'Connell

Background

This special issue was conceived because of our interests in the social and economic determinants shaping what children and young people eat and the part food plays in their everyday lives. There is evidence that poverty and household food insecurity have increased in the global north in the wake of the Great Recession and that European families with children have been hardest hit (Riches 2014, Chzhen 2017, Davis 2017). Whilst food insecurity rates in the United States are declining toward their pre-recession levels, more than 42 million people experienced food insecurity in 2015 (Coleman-Jensen A 2016) and households with children are also more likely to be food insecure. Qualitative studies of children's perspectives of poverty show the damaging effects of material disadvantage and social exclusion, as well as the ways that resourceful and resilient young people manage the effects of poverty (Ridge 2011) and subvert consumer cultures (Chin 2001, Pugh 2009). Despite some research on how food poverty is experienced by young people in the global South e.g.(Morrow et al. 2017) and US e.g.(Fram et al. 1979, Connell 2005), however, not enough is known about how children and young people negotiate food and eating in contexts of poverty and inequality or the difference that social contexts and social positionings make.

We suggest the food practices of children in poor and low-income households deserve special attention because food is fundamental – not only to health but also social life – and provides an important lens for understanding lived experiences of material deprivation and social exclusion. Children's and young people's food consumption is manifested in their physical, emotional and mental health and, as papers in this SI also show, impacts on their ability to study and concentrate at school (Bundy et al.). Commensality also plays an important role in establishing and cementing social networks, with food mediating children's attempts to connect to, and reject, social relations with others (James 1979). Food is also integral to the reciprocal relationships of care in which children - and adults - are enmeshed (Clement 1996, Cook 2008). It is a medium for children's expression of identity and control and a means of enacting agency and increasing their autonomy as they grow older (O'Connell et al. 2016). Exclusion from the routine food practices that are part of children's and young people's 'ordinary living patterns' (Townsend 1979)(p31) may therefore be regarded as a dimension of relative poverty (O'Connell In press). By focussing on children's and young people's food practices within the different social contexts in which they live, and eat, the SI makes a contribution to how poverty and inequality operate through this lens of everyday contemporary practices whilst not neglecting the importance of geographical and neighbourhood context, be that at a local, regional or national level across the UK, Eastern Europe and North America.

The papers

Many authors within this special issue adopt or draw on the Food and Agriculture Organisation's definition of food security adapted by Liz Dowler and colleagues, that food insecurity is 'the inability to consume an adequate quality or sufficient quantity of food in socially acceptable ways, or the uncertainty that one will be able to do so' (Dowler 2001)(p12). Some authors also highlight limitations of 'food insecurity' measures and the ways they are invoked and applied. For example, whilst in developed economies food insecurity is usually linked to having insufficient money, as papers by BAGELMAN and MOTT demonstrate, local availability of and access to food and food knowledge are also vital. LAMBIE MUMFORD AND SIM also highlight the dangers of interventions and

measures of food insecurity that abstract children from the family contexts that are so important for shaping and understanding their experiences. KNIGHT et al emphasise the importance of food for social participation that is sometimes left out of measures of food insecurity and unresolved or compounded by the 'food aid' initiatives designed to address it.

Our interest in understanding children's food in the contexts of their lives extends to a concern with the methodologies that might help to reveal the stories of young people and we are pleased that five out of the seven papers in this special issue include analysis of qualitative data collected from children and young people. Participant observation, interviews, focus groups and other participatory and ethnographic methods position children as active stakeholders in the food that they and their caregivers have access to. Analysis of such data counters the notion that children and young people are passive receivers of food and care (Grieshaber 1997) or that teenagers place additional demands on family food budgets and domestic labour, through their 'fussy' requests for different meals (Backett-Milburn et al. 2006, Backett-Milburn et al. 2010). So often parents, particularly mothers, are positioned as being responsible for 'good' mothering and, by default, for providing 'good' food. The paper by CAIRNS highlights that this relationship is not uni-directional and that young people are active collaborators in family food work, supporting mothers who are struggling to provide food through contributing their own earned income or food they access via local youth initiatives (MOTT; CAIRNS). CAIRNS analysis also shows that teenagers empathise with maternal stress when money and food are unavailable and the paper by KNIGHT et al suggests that young people are acutely aware when parents are going without food, giving all that is available to their children. Young people further support their families by looking after siblings, so that parents can go to work. Roma young people in Hungary (HUSZ), whilst contributing in this way, were simultaneously excluded from attending local child feeding initiatives because such schemes were not aimed at whole families.

The issue of parental employment and income (particularly from welfare benefits) were issues that youth in several papers in this SI were aware of in terms of the impact on food security of unemployment and money not stretching to provide adequate or 'healthy' food across a whole month (MOTT; CAIRNS; WILLS et al; KNIGHT et al). Young people also had views about the affordability of food (WILLS et al; KNIGHT et al) and the impact of their own limited economic capital on alimentary participation (Pfeiffer et al. 2011). Buying and eating food with friends is especially challenging in socioeconomically mixed local areas when others have more money or do not need to consider the cost of what they purchase (Fletcher et al. 2013). This lack of capital also related to a perception by young people in WILLS et al's study that eligibility for means-tested free school meals excluded their families from this source of food (because they were not 'poor enough') whilst those who were in receipt of free school meals were not always able to purchase adequate amounts of food throughout the school day. The paper by HUSZ highlights that lack of food over the weekend makes paying attention particularly difficult for Hungarian children on a Monday morning. Similarly, in KNIGHT et al's paper, young people reported falling asleep or being in a bad mood when they had not had enough to eat and WILLS et al's analysis alludes to some young people skipping school when they could not afford to eat.

The issues highlighted above must be conceptualised within broader socioeconomic and political contexts; children's and young people's experiences of food poverty and inequality are not manifestations of individual or family inadequacies or failures. All the papers in this special issue usefully situate the studies they draw from within their local and national

contexts. The papers by MOTT, CAIRNS and BAGELMAN show the diversity of circumstances and backgrounds that underpin life in the USA and Canada. Rural Missouri (MOTT), urban New Jersey (CAIRNS) and indigenous community life in British Columbia (BAGELMAN) present different challenges for young people trying to access food but these papers all show that factors such as race, ethnicity, family type and socioeconomic status are linked to food insecurity. BAGELMAN argues that measures and conceptualisations of food insecurity do a disservice to indigenous populations of children and young people since even socially-underpinned definitions take inadequate account of the role of traditional food practices that forge connectivity such as harvesting seaweed or indigenous plants. In the paper on rural and Roma children in Hungary, HUSZ shows that such families are not viewed as 'needy' despite having very little money since officials and locals perceive that parents would try harder to grow food, manage their finances and make use of local child feeding initiatives if they were truly hungry. The scoping review by LAMBIE MUMFORD and SIMS, focusing on breakfast and holiday feeding programmes in the UK highlights that such interventions, whilst providing food for some children, some of the time, do little to take account of wider socioeconomic limitations such as surviving on uncertain and dwindling welfare benefits. The UK context for young people's food practices is further illustrated in the papers by KNIGHT et al and WILLS et al.

The contributions from WILLS et al, KNIGHT et al, HUSZ and BAGELMAN provide evidence of how governments and local authorities directly shape the food landscape. This includes through setting eligibility for means-tested free school meals; school nutrition standards and whether to implement child feeding initiatives at local level. Young people are less likely to eat the nutritious food available in school if they have not been consulted about changes to the menu or dining environment (Wills et al. 2016) so even those who are eligible for free school meals may avoid eating in school, or have to pay to eat additional food or drink bought from the commercial environment, despite not having sufficient money to do so. The socioeconomic context of the commercial food landscape is shown in the analysis in WILLS et al's paper to influence where young people from lower income families buy food at lunchtime since food retailers in poorer areas build good relationships with young people in ways not evident in more affluent neighbourhoods. MOTT's analysis similarly shows the importance of neighbourhood bonds in terms of the presence or absence of stigma and shame that young people feel about their lack of food. This was compounded since many rural families in MOTT's study moved to a new area on a regular basis thereby also loosening their social ties to a community. MOTT's research reports that many young people feel 'out of place' because of their lack of food security and her study plus that of WILLS et al suggest that schools are not always safe, positive environments that engender food security.

Despite the evidence from the papers in the SI that poverty, food insecurity and inequality are multi-layered, relational and embedded in socio-economic contexts, governments and local authorities often frame food insecurity and poverty as an individual problem, blaming families for being unable to reduce their costs and live within their means. Meanwhile school policies and practices vary nationally and regionally and sometimes compound rather than alleviate children's and young people's exclusion from healthy diets and routine food practices. This special issue challenges the idea of the autonomous, individual 'consumer', which is often implied in school meal service provision, invoked in official narratives and via many 'food poverty' interventions. It shows that children and young people themselves actively contest neoliberal discourses and practices that hold their parents (particularly mothers) accountable for their poverty. Not 'seeing' or listening to children and young people

who eat in contexts of poverty and inequality risks their social isolation and disintegration of the communities in which they live because they are unlikely to achieve food security.

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