

9. Families and food in hard times (FFP)

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PROJECT DESCRIPTORS

Duration: 1 May 2014–30 April 2019 (5 years)

Web Links: <https://cordis.europa.eu/project/id/337977>
<https://foodinhardtimes.org/>

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Funding Organisation: European Research Council, Starting Grant FP7/2007-2013), ERC award number 337977, amount €1,370,937.

THE FFP CASE STUDY

The official name of the study in the proposal to ERC was ‘Families and Food Poverty’ (FFP), which provided the acronym used in the case study. Given the potentially shaming nature of being unable to feed ones’ children, and the differential ‘visibility’ of (food) poverty in the three countries, the international team and the advisory group had a detailed discussion about the public facing name of the project. After much deliberation, the idea of ‘hard times’ was settled upon as a way not only of alluding to the work of that title by Charles Dickens, but also as a mean of reframing and depersonalising the problem of poverty.

The case study presented here describes the different stages in the FFP project, from the decision to apply for European Research Council funding and the formation of the research team, through to the completion of the project. The grant was hosted in the UK by the Thomas Coram Research Unit at University College London, which provided administrative and logistic support.

Aims and Objectives

The research aimed to understand the causes and consequences of food poverty and their relationship to social structures and public policies by applying a mixed-methods international comparative case study design.

The specific objectives of the study were:

- To examine and compare the extent of food insecurity in three European countries, Norway, Portugal and the UK, by conducting secondary analysis of international quantitative data
- To explore and compare the experiences, perspectives and understandings of children and young people (aged 11–15 years) and parents in low-income families in rural and urban areas in these countries, by applying a range of in-depth qualitative methods
- To develop the methodology in this area through the use of a multi-method comparative research approach
- To inform the intervention and advocacy work of not-profit organisations, policymakers and practitioners by engaging with them at various stages of the research

Themes and Research Questions

The project examined the extent of food insecurity for low-income families with children in three European countries impacted by high (UK), medium (Portugal) and low (Norway) levels of austerity policies. The research set out to identify which children and types of households were at greatest risk of food insecurity, and which public, charitable and other types of initiatives and provisions aimed to address household food insecurity. The project also sought to examine how food insecurity was framed discursively as a ‘public issue’.

In formulating the study’s research questions, living on a low income and experiencing food insecurity were considered not only to be variable but also to be specific to the social conditions in which families find themselves in terms of the resources available to them and the ways in which they manage poverty. The investigation included: the ways in which households procured food, covering the effects of local (un)availability of food; the effects of parents’ paid employment, and how far school meals mitigated food poverty for children; the effects of food poverty on the social participation of both parents and children and the emotional consequences for children of social exclusion from their peer groups, for example by generating feelings of stigma and shame (O’Connell & Brannen, 2021, pp. 33–34).

A number of the research questions required detailed qualitative study of families:

1. How does food figure in children’s and families’ everyday routines and social relations?
2. How do families manage food in the context of poverty and the types of help they access?
3. Do families rely on public and charitable sources of support?
4. Who takes responsibility for food work, including children’s contributions?
5. How far do families draw on informal sources of help, including extended families and social networks?

THE RESEARCH PROCESS

Since European Research Council (ERC) grants are awarded on the basis of research excellence to

support investigator-driven research across all fields, the European Commission (2007) is less prescriptive about the topics and approaches selected and the way the funds are dispersed than in projects funded under other programmes. This case study examines how the type and amount of funding awarded and the prior experience of the team shaped the ways in which the international dimension and the disciplinary elements were integrated into the project as it developed.

Meeting the Funder's Requirements

The ERC Starting Grant provided generous funding and required the principal investigator (PI) to be employed on the grant at a minimum of 60% full-time equivalent. Adequate time was built into the project for its management, including dedicated administrative support and regular face-to-face meetings within the team and with the project advisory group.

A challenge to the project's success in the early stages was a major change in the administrative support that was available to the project at the institutional level. The host institution (Institute of Education, IOE) 'merged' with (was taken over by) a much larger Institution, University College London (UCL), very soon after the project started. The project changed from being the only ERC funded study in the IOE to being one of more than a hundred at UCL with its well-established – but less personal and more thinly spread – structures for managing European awards. These changes brought both advantages and disadvantages.

In particular, the timing and process of the change from one system of 'support' to another caused delays in the negotiations when it was necessary to replace the Portuguese partners. Ultimately, it took around 18 months for the new partners in Portugal to be instated. ERC funding proved to be adequate to support the work described in the proposal, although one item was disallowed at the contract stage, since ERC deemed that not enough justification had been provided for the line of the budget that included costs for transcription and translation. Consequently, insufficient funding was available for translation of the Portuguese and Norwegian interviews, meaning only the interview case summaries and field notes were translated into English. In some ways, this reduction in the data was helpful because it meant that the team had to find other less onerous ways to 'handle' the raw data. But it also meant that the PI and senior researcher could not analyse more deeply topics and assumptions that were not foregrounded in the summaries, and, occasionally, had to ask the partners to provide further details.

Unlike many other EU funding schemes, the ERC is interested, above all, in scientific excellence. It does not require applicants to demonstrate policy relevance or to include societal 'impacts' among its aims. Although the ERC was not the most obvious choice of funders for the FFP as conceived by the award holder, the PI was able to make the case at interview that this aspect of the project was vital given the empirical context in which it was situated.

Building the Project Team

ERC starting grants are intended to support excellent principal investigators at the stage in their

careers when they are starting their own independent research team or programme. The FFP PI was (self) selected to apply for an award because she fitted the criteria for the scheme by having fewer than seven years postdoctoral research experience. She had gained an ESRC funded MRes and PhD in social anthropology before training as a postdoctoral researcher at the Thomas Coram Research Unit (TCRU).

The idea for the project topic and the rationale for the selection of the (core) research team were generated in the aftermath of the global financial crisis that occurred in 2008. At that time, the detrimental effects of this event on those who were already among the most disadvantaged in society were becoming increasingly evident across Europe. The evidence, often based on international media reports, was alarming: increasing numbers of children were arriving at school hungry, and the number of food banks handing out food parcels to families forced to choose between 'heating and eating' was rising dramatically. Little evidence existed about the types of families to which the growing numbers of children who lack enough decent food to eat belonged, or about the particular ways in which food poverty manifests and is managed and experienced in different places. Hardly any first-hand accounts were available presenting the experiences of children and young people, an omission that members of the TCRU, which since 1973 had specialised in research on children and families, were keen to address.

The PI had not previously managed an international team, although she had led research teams including members with a mix of seniority and backgrounds. She was guided in the methodological strategy and supported in the management of the process by senior members of the core team, who were highly experienced in international comparative approaches.

In selecting the core team members and partners, the study aimed to bring together and build on insights from, and contribute to, three subfields of cognate disciplines: sociology of the family, food studies, that straddles sociology and anthropology, primarily, but also geography, and social policy. The international team brought a range of methodological expertise in quantitative, qualitative and mixed-methods approaches. The inclusion of researchers from cognate disciplines, though some of them identified first and foremost as social researchers, was important to the project's successful implementation. But perhaps more important was the cooperative relationships that were achieved within the national and international teams. The core team members at TCRU had worked together on previous projects and were involved in developing the idea and the proposal.

Three European countries, Norway, Portugal and the UK were selected to provide contrasting contexts for an analysis of the conditions surrounding 'austerity'. They also differed in terms of the type of welfare state, levels of poverty and inequality. Background data were readily available for secondary analysis in the first phase of the project for all three countries. An additional reason for selecting Norway was that the TCRU team members were keen to work with Silje Skuland at the Norwegian National Institute of Consumer Research.

Most of the participants were recruited on the basis of earlier professional contacts with one exception: the recruitment of a public health nutritionist in Portugal. An initial aim in selecting the wider international team was to include a mix of disciplinary expertise. Early in the project, it became clear that this collaboration was not going to work. Having sought advice from the senior researcher, Julia Brannen, and the chair of the project's advisory group, Elizabeth Dowler, an expert on the social and policy dimensions of food and human nutrition, the PI applied to the ERC for an amendment to terminate the Portuguese contract and set up a new contract. The new partners were a group of sociologists in a policy-focussed research unit similar to that of the core team who had already collaborated with its members.

Among the problems that resulted in the termination of the contract with the first Portuguese partner were differences in expectations about preparation for meetings and time keeping. These problems were compounded by differences in 'attitudes to authority'. As the PI of a starting grant, the award holder was younger and had fewer years of research experience than the head of Portuguese team. The rapidity with which the newly contracted research team in Portugal was able to get to grips with the methodology and methods, recruit a sample and make up for lost time caused by the protracted amendment process was partly attributable to their familiarity with the underlying concepts and research approaches geared at understanding children and families' everyday (food) practices. In addition, the concentration of resources and relative low cost of labour in Portugal meant that more staff and time could be devoted to fieldwork than anticipated. Recruitment was also aided by relatively higher rates of poverty in Portugal and existing connections of the research unit (Instituto de Ciências Sociais) and team members with third sector organisations and schools.

Research Design and Methods

A primary concern in selecting the core team members was to ensure that they had the expertise and skills required to implement an international mixed-methods research design. The study used both quantitative and qualitative methods to address differently framed research questions. This design was well suited to the nature of the award received and the project's aims and objectives. The design required a methodology involving secondary analysis of several large-scale datasets, in combination with micro-level qualitative studies requiring a case-based approach.

A documentary analysis was first carried out to examine the discourses and policies concerning food insecurity in each country and how they changed over time. National policies and programmes were analysed, alongside relevant official statistics and newspaper reports on families, poverty and food (Knight et al., 2018). This part of the research contextualised food poverty by taking into account the different histories of the three countries and their welfare states (O'Connell & Brannen, 2021).

To examine the research question about how many and which types of families and children were at risk of food insecurity in each country, the quantitative researchers in the UK team carried out secondary analysis of the EU-Statistics on Income and Living Conditions (EU-SILC) and the Health

Behaviour in School-aged Children study (HBSC). They recognised that, although questions asked in the surveys on which these datasets were based had undergone testing, and employed widely used indicators, for example of deprivation, they had the potential to be interpreted differently in different contexts. For example, EU-SILC includes in its material deprivation module an item that has been used as a proxy for household food insecurity: the inability to afford a meal containing meat, chicken, fish or a vegetarian equivalent as source of protein every second day, an amount generally recommended in dietary guidelines across European countries. As revealed in the ethnographic literature and discussions with the Portuguese team, a ‘meal’ in some countries by definition includes meat or fish. Interpretations of data in international surveys therefore need to be carefully scrutinised.

Central to the subsequent case-based qualitative methodology was its power to make comparisons between families. Comparing and contrasting cases, selected on the basis of apparently similar characteristics in different countries and places, was an important part of comparative research. But the FFP team sought to avoid the risk of ‘methodological nationalism’ by overemphasising aspects of cultural context in interpreting data within a single societal context. They were interested not only in contextual differences but also in similarities.

A second danger that they wanted to avoid in comparing the same phenomenon was the failure to realise that questions, assumptions and concepts that seem self-evident may have entirely different meanings in other contexts in the knowledge that concepts cannot be separated from contexts since ‘each national context has its own demography, cultural expectations and social welfare regime, based in political, cultural and ideological traditions’ (O’Connell & Brannen, 2021, p. 47).

Because it is not legal in Portugal to collect data about ethnicity, the recruitment of a diverse sample of low-income families in the qualitative phase of the study could not be carried out with ethnicity as a variable. In practice, this issue was not a problem since the recruitment of families focussed on self-defined financial need. A major aim of much of the qualitative analysis was to compare household food insecurity across family types – lone parents and couples – as discovered in the analysis of the EU-SILC. Because the EU-SILC data on the risk of poverty and food insecurity were collected at the household level, it was not possible to investigate their differential impact on multiple families living within the same household. This limitation meant that it was potentially misleading to assign a lone-parent family the poverty status associated with another family or person living within the same household when resources may not be shared. For this reason, it was decided not to include multi-family households in the analysis of the EU-SILC.

The EU-SILC finding that less difference existed in household food insecurity by family type in Portugal, compared to the other two countries, could be partly explained by methodological reasons, since the analysis excluded lone parents living in multi-family households, which represent a significant share of families in that country. These multigenerational families defied conventional definitions of lone parenthood and were possibly miscoded in large-scale

international datasets. In other words, it was possible that those most likely to experience food insecurity lived in multi-family households and were not included in this aspect of the macro-level analysis. The Portuguese team was able to supply another explanation based on their intimate knowledge of the Portuguese policy environment, namely that the families with the lowest incomes in Portugal are likely to be those least able to provide and rely on familial support. In contrast, the qualitative research alerted the team to the phenomenon of multi-family households and their experiences of food poverty.

The qualitative research provided the means to conceptualise the food poverty of families in the context of their own societies by drawing on budget standards data to examine how the food expenditure of families compares with the cost of diets that meet health and social participation needs determined nationally (O'Connell & Brannen, 2021). The team in Portugal found it difficult to translate some terms from the UK team's list of 'strategies' for coping with food poverty that were based on previous research and formed part of the interview; for example, one strategy termed 'cooking from scratch' in English had no synonym in common Portuguese parlance.

The qualitative 'case summaries' were written up from the transcripts and researchers' field notes in accordance with a standardised template of format and content, which was agreed by the research teams in each country. Examples of this 'thick description' were subsequently collectively analysed in team meetings that involved the discussion and comparison of case summaries. In these annual international meetings, online discussions and monthly national meetings researchers sought to elicit aspects of cultural, local and national features of context which impinged upon the families' lives and might otherwise have remained unspoken or invisible, both in the material collected in their own country and in the material collected elsewhere. This discussion and the exchange of case summaries across the team at earlier stages of the analysis were especially important because the Portuguese and Norwegian interviews were not translated in full.

Engagement and Dissemination

The advisory group, which was composed of representatives of academia and charities in the UK, was closely involved throughout the project. The PI reported regularly to the ERC. Draft dissemination strategies were prepared by the PI and shared with the team and advisory group for comment.

Given the growing relevance and high profile of the problems addressed in the project – household food insecurity – especially in the UK, and the aim to achieve social as well as scientific impact, attention was accorded in the dissemination plans to managing the demands of publishing academic outputs and engaging with audiences outside academia. Although the project completion date was 2019, the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic added to the interest shown by policymakers and other stakeholders in the findings and recommendations produced by the project after the end of the award.

A blog written for the Child Poverty Action Group (O’Connell et al., 2019a) compared a free school meal in Portugal and the UK and was published on international school meals day. It complemented a book, published in 2019 with CPAG (O’Connell et al., 2019b), that focussed on the findings regarding children’s experiences of food, and lack of food, in the context of low income in the UK. The launch of the book at the House of Commons was widely covered in the print and online news media, and the authors spoke about the research on the television news and BBC Radio 4’s Woman’s Hour. Although this work led to some important publicity and societal impacts, it encroached on the time available for working on academic outputs within the timespan of the funded project.

The ERC proposal included a commitment to produce a monograph on the comparative research. An academic book focussing on the international comparative research was written by the PI and senior researcher and published open access by UCL Press after the end of the award (O’Connell & Brannen, 2021).

It was agreed that, in general, the relationship of the findings to public policies and priorities was best pursued at country level to allow recommendations to be tailored toward national contexts. Each team took control of disseminating the findings to different audiences within their own countries. In the UK, it was useful to draw on comparisons with Portugal in engaging with debates about the provision of free school meals. The approach adopted in the outputs by the partners was to attribute first and second authorship to those who carried out the analysis for the publication, followed by other contributing authors in alphabetical order.

LESSONS LEARNT

As the holder of a five-year fully funded ERC award that provided experience of managing an international team, the principal investigator of the FFP project drew a number of lessons that are relevant to other mid-career researchers.

- ERC awards are extremely competitive, but once obtained offer conditions – generous funding over a long period of time with minimal reporting requirements – that are conducive to developing a career and experience in international research.
- Funding proposals need to budget for local administrative and academic support to ensure that for ERC award holders can take full advantage of the opportunities afforded by the grant.
- Recipients of ERC grants need to be able to rely on their host institution to support their project and to assist them in overcoming financial, legal and practical issues that arise in the course of the research.
- Awards holders can gain valuable experience of how to build and manage an international interdisciplinary research team by being involved in research programmes led by senior colleagues, or by leading research programmes that involve senior colleagues as advisors.

- The success of international multidisciplinary collaborations depends to a large extent on pre-existing relationships with researchers trained in cognate disciplines, who have experience of working across cultural and disciplinary boundaries using a combination of methods, are proficient in English, and are highly motivated to engage in constructive and productive working relationships.
- In teams composed of established and less experienced international researchers, it is important for senior researchers to train and mentor junior colleagues, who may be completing their own linked projects.
- Provision needs to be made for research training to be conducted on the job, for example, by carrying out the fieldwork interviews in pairs, or by following the guidance given by core team members to researchers undertaking secondary analyses of quantitative and qualitative data.
- Effective communication should be maintained throughout the project by organising regular international and UK team meetings, keeping all team members updated with minutes of meetings, listing actions agreed, and factoring in time for socialising when planning collaborative events.
- Throughout the process of managing an international interdisciplinary project, principal investigators need to ensure that they meet the funder's requirements for engagement with a variety of stakeholders, including policy audiences.
- They need to develop a publishing strategy and to learn how to manage relationships with publishers and the media.

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