

Food, families and work: Children's changing food practices in the context of parental employment

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Children's food is at the centre of global concerns about nutritional inequalities and rising obesity. In the UK, debate about the nation's diet, and children's diets in particular, focusses on a whole range of social and economic changes, one of which is the increased amount of time that parents, mothers especially, spend in the workplace. Whilst popular assumptions and some survey research address the diets of children of 'working mothers', however, little in depth research has examined the food practices of children with parents in paid employment or how these change over time.

A key aim of the mixed methods study on which the book, *Food, Families and Work*, is based was to examine the embeddedness of children's food and eating in social routines and social relations, and also the life course. A purposive sample of forty seven case studies of households of employed parents and their children was selected from a national survey ([the National Diet and Nutrition Survey, NDNS](#)). The research methods employed included interviews and visual methods with children to capture their food practices, in depth interviews with parents, alongside secondary analysis of a range of variables from several surveys including NDNS. Qualitative methods were repeated with thirty six of the families who were followed up after two years, together with further secondary analyses of large scale data. The study was conducted between 2009 and 2014 (1).

The research that is reported in the book debunks five fallacies. A central fallacy is that employed parents and, in particular, mothers' working hours, are to blame for deteriorating children's diets because of lack of time, use of convenience foods and failing to create regular meal routines. The study's analysis of the NDNS shows that socio-economic status is more important than mothers' employment. Children whose parents are in higher socio-economic groups have higher nutritional scores and consume more portions of combined fruit and vegetables than children in families in households from lower socio-economic groups.

A second fallacy is that contemporary fathers are all 'new men' who are routinely involved in feeding the family. In two parent families most mothers of younger children work shorter hours than fathers or work part-time. However, our analysis of the national UK household panel study, [Understanding Society](#), suggests that women remain overwhelmingly responsible for foodwork even when employed full time, although men do more when women's working hours are longer. Despite the so-called 'Master Chef effect', only a small number of fathers interviewed – those who worked from home or unconventional hours - did the lions' share of cooking although most fathers cooked a weekend fry up, barbequed sausages, helped with shopping, or loaded the dishwasher. Furthermore, over the two years we followed families, men's contribution decreased as fathers climbed the promotion ladder, worked longer hours or did longer commutes. As one mother said 'his promotion came with more work for me'.

A third myth attributes a supposed decline in family meals to mothers' employment and working hours. While some survey research has reported an association between increased

maternal employment and less regular family meal routines, a closer look reveals a much more complex picture and raises questions about how family meals – and families themselves – are defined. As the findings show, parents' accounts of their lives and how food fits into them suggest that whether families eat together does not depend only on mothers' or fathers' working hours but rather on the synchronization of the time paths, tastes and preferences of different family members, particularly those of children whose lives get busier as they get older. The notion of everyone eating from the same pot is also called into question in the context of a 24/7 society in which individual preferences are fostered by a highly marketised food environment. Nonetheless, almost without exception, families interviewed thought that eating together was desirable and something they should do more often. They were, however, accepting of, and pragmatic about, the difficulties.

A fourth fallacy that has been perpetrated in some of the popular press is that busy and distracted working mothers abnegate their responsibility for controlling what children eat and 'let their kids get fat'. Policy makers also often seem to assume that parents should be, and are willing and able, to regulate children's diets. At the same time, it is clear that the food industry has long recognized children's considerable power to influence their own and their families' food intake and targeted its marketing at children directly. Our qualitative longitudinal research examines how children and parents negotiate what children eat. It shows that, as children get older, they exercise increasing autonomy and eat in a range of settings outside home to the extent that some parents felt increasingly powerless and suggested attempts to maintain control over children's diets were counterproductive. Busy parents whose children would only eat food they liked often sought to avoid conflict over food and keep the peace at home. As one father said, 'it's probably not worth the battle'.

A fifth fallacy is that surveys and nutrition measures represent 'the gold standard method' for the investigation of food and eating. Because of food's embeddedness in the everyday, and the way that food practices go unacknowledged, different methods and types of data are needed to understand why people eat as they do and, importantly, how this changes over time. The study adopted a mixed method and longitudinal design that provided insights into the ways in which dietary and other behavioural changes typically happen at social transition points. In a third of the thirty six families we followed over two years in the qualitative part of the study, children's diets improved or deteriorated as their own lives or those of their parents shifted. In some households, on the other hand, established food practices weathered the changes occurring in children's and parents' lives. For example, the birth of a new baby or a mother's new relationship were in some cases associated with changes in children's and families' food practices, but such events did not necessarily provoke dietary change.

Understanding change is not only about identifying the contexts and conditions that can disrupt and transform food practices but also the continuities. The longitudinal design of the study afforded this opportunity but also raised challenges, including the assessment of diet quality and change. While examining change over a relatively short time (two years) raises issues about analytic closure and brings to the forefront the contingent and unstable nature of the interpretation of the data ([McLeod and Thomson 2009](#)), two years are a significant portion of a young child's life and demonstrated the importance of focusing on life course

change in the early years. A second methodological contribution was the study's attempt to capture the range of settings in which children eat and how these changed as children moved from child care into school and between primary and secondary school. A third methodological contribution was the study's attempt to include the wide range of food practices in which families engage: sourcing food, cooking and catering for individual tastes as well as and meal routines.

The ways that the results of this research speak to the need for major policy change are several. Public health policy has focused too much on individual consumer 'choice' and needs to focus more upon the ways in which food is embedded in everyday relationships and routines and given meaning beyond nutrition. Food is not simply a matter of individual preference, while knowledge of what is 'healthy' food does not necessarily translate to 'healthy eating'. To take account of this, public policy needs to regulate the food industry more stringently to counter the deleterious ways in which it shapes children's and families' tastes and consumption patterns. A second direction for change concerns the need to engender an appreciation of food and nutrition early in life so that both boys and girls learn not only about healthy eating, but the pleasure and politics of food. More policy attention also needs to be paid to the fact that children of working parents eat in different places. Because children move through a range of institutional and other settings over the life course (childcare and schools) 'behaviour change' strategies focused on settings rather than individuals could usefully target the transition points involved, for example children's move to secondary school. Such guidance could also be usefully targeted at new fathers to encourage them to do their fair share and incorporate preparing healthy balanced meals for their families into their everyday lives.

Fundamentally, *Food, Families and Work* argues that there is a need to change the political rhetoric. Parents are not the only culprits where the quality of children's diets falls below the expected norm; there is little evidence to suggest working mothers are particularly to blame. Furthermore, in order to work effectively, health advice that is offered to people must make sense in terms of the routines and ways in which people celebrate and seek to practice family life. Policies also need to enable fathers and mothers to create environments in which families can cook, eat and spend time together. Solutions to these problems need also to extend beyond public policy to the labour market. But first of all public policy needs to stop individualizing and blaming parents.

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Brief bios

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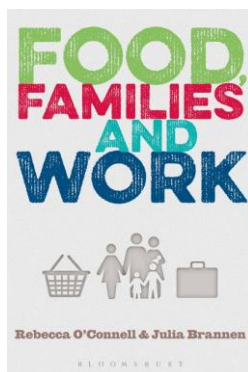
Rebecca O'Connell is a Senior Research Officer in the Thomas Coram Research Unit, UCL Institute of Education. She is a social anthropologist whose research interests focus on the intersection of care and work, particularly foodwork and childcare. Rebecca is co-convenor of the [British Sociological Association Food Study Group](#). She is currently leading a European Research Council funded study focused on [Families and Food in Hard Times](#) in Portugal, the UK and Norway.

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Food, Families and Work debunks the myth that working mothers are to blame for what children eat



O'Connell and Brannen argue for change to the political rhetoric about feeding families: health advice must take account of how people live

Food, Families and Work shows mothers remain overwhelmingly responsible for foodwork even when employed full time

Food, Families and Work shows that whether families eat together depends on the timetables, tastes and preferences of different family members including children's

O'Connell and Brannen argue for a combination of different types of methods and data in the study of family and children's food practices

Food, Families and Work provides important findings on where children eat and how life course transitions affect children's diet

Food, Families and Work: the first book to consider how working families negotiate food in their everyday lives

