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BOOK REVIEW | ALEXANDER RODNEY

Gender, Class and Food: Families, Bodies and Health
Julie M. Parsons


In Gender, Class and Food: Families, Bodies and Health, Julia M. Parsons examines “everyday foodways,” defined as “all aspects of everyday food practices,” and how they contribute to the reproduction of inequality in the United Kingdom (16). To capture the production of everyday foodways, Parsons interviews 75 respondents over email to generate written narratives about their food biographies. Parsons aims to connect these food memories to their broader socio-cultural context and discovers that gender and class shape how people present their past and current foodways, including how they distinguish themselves as responsible neoliberal citizens through food. The construction of neoliberal subjectivity through gendered and classed food practices echoes findings detailed in the work of scholars Parsons uses to analyze her data, including Peter Naccarato and Kathleen Lebesco’s Culinary Capital (2012) and Josée Johnston and Shyon Baumann’s Foodies (2015).

With a sample that is composed overwhelmingly of middle-class respondents, Parsons shows how the middle class draws boundaries around food practices. This boundary work includes the circumscription of appropriate kinds of foodways, often through comparison with morally reprehensible foodways, although Parsons’ book is not specifically a study of how symbolic boundaries are constructed. With this book, Parsons, a Sociology Lecturer at Plymouth University in England, adds a UK perspective to the recent scholarly resurgence of interest in family foodways and gendered foodways such as Kate Cairns and Josée Johnston’s Food and Femininity (2015) and Brenda Beagan et al.’s Acquired Tastes (2014).

As the book’s title suggests, each chapters focuses on one of five interrelated thematic areas in which gender and class positions are produced through foodways. Throughout these chapters, Parsons draws from the work of food, class, gender and family scholars in order to explain how participants articulate their food histories. Chapter 2 focuses on family foodways, demonstrating how food acts as a marker of culinary capital in the family (especially cultural omnivorousness) and women are positioned as responsible for daily domestic foodwork, while men cook for pleasure and leisure. Here Parsons’ autobiographical data has value for demonstrating how respondents with working-class family origins create anachronistic narratives emphasizing how their families adhered to the hegemonic, “appropriate,” middle-class foodways of today (27). Chapter 3 looks at expressions of maternal foodways in which healthy, homecooked food is depicted as the ideal for (middle-class) mothers. Parsons fleshes out how these appropriate maternal foodways are a fundamental part of contemporary “intensive mothering” (51). In Chapter 4, Parsons shows how eating healthfully is a way to demonstrate high cultural capital, particularly for women. This chapter gets sidetracked with a discussion of complementary and alternative medicine that seems disjointed in relation to the overall focus on gender, class and everyday foodways. Chapter 5 examines embodied foodways, revealing how restraint and self control are also forms of high cultural capital, again particularly for women, and are specifically associated with thinness. Here Parsons presents the first of two original arguments in the book that are grounded in different expressions of everyday foodways for middle class women and men. She argues that elite cultural capital for women is “associated with a thin body,” and that all women’s bodies are “marked categories” because they are subject to moral critique, while for men cultural capital is associated with gourmet practices such as dining out (118). Chapter 6 explores (predominantly) men’s epicurean foodways, referring to connoisseurs who take sensual pleasure in eating ‘good’ food and drink. Here Parsons argues that epicurean foodways are masculine foodways, distinct from domestic foodways and impossible for mothers to embody, because they are associated with competition, adventurousness, and heterosexuality.

Consistent references to intersectional food studies literature throughout the book makes it useful for a reader interested in reviewing research on how gender and class structure food practices. Ideally, the reader would be equipped with an understanding of the broader political economy (i.e., neoliberalism) and how foodways can act as a form of class distinction, because articulation of the larger social context is limited and clarity of cultural concepts is occasionally lacking. Several concepts that are salient to the analysis are used inconsistently, including “cultural omnivorousness” (alternately referring to eating a diverse array of ethnocultural foods [31] or a combination of highbrow and lowbrow foods [34]), “epicurean foodways” (distinguished from similar concepts like “foodie” or “gourmet” [135] but then used interchangeably with those concepts [158, 161]), “embodied foodways” (described as synonymous with dietary restraint and the thin ideal [110], begging the question of how other kinds of embodied foodways are classified) and “convenience foods” (both...
preference [34] and distaste [163] for these is indicated as being associated with high cultural capital.  

*Gender, Class and Food: Families, Bodies and Health* has limitations related to methodology, sample construction and theoretical framing. I would have liked the book to address why email exchanges were chosen as a way to collect data, particularly since Parsons notes that everyday foodways are affective, emotional and embodied practices. Methodologically, Parsons describes choosing an auto/biographical method in order to give voice to participants through controlling the crafting and editing of their own narrative. While this method may empower middle-class subjects who are comfortable engaging in written dialogue with an academic, it also may serve to silence other kinds of voices. Asking participants to produce narratives in writing effectively blocks people with literacy or fluency issues from participating in this kind of research.

This sample construction in this study also has limitations. It is unclear whether the sample was purposefully constructed to only include middle-class respondents, or whether that was the result of snowball sampling via middle class social networks. I would have liked Parsons to address sample construction in greater depth, specifically addressing why the sample did not include comparable narratives from working-class people and “epicurean” women. Without the presence of these voices, this book is not so much a study of everyday foodways but a study of middle-class foodways and epicurean men. Finally, this study has limitations in regards to its classification as intersectional analysis. Parsons overlooks social categories beyond gender and class, but notes that she is not aiming “to dismiss the significance of other major/minor” social categories (6). This is problematic because the bracketing of other intersections seems to reproduce what intersectional theorizing by black feminists was developed to counter: too much attention to how gender and class intersections impact white, middle-class women. I would have liked Parsons to address why other social categories were not considered, especially since participants’ references to racial-ethnic foodways were all categorized as classed practices and disconnected from other social locations. In the academic world, published work is often thought of not as a finished product but as a conversation in progress. *Gender, Class and Food: Families, Bodies and Health* is definitely a conversation starter around the best way to study everyday foodways and whose foodways are included in those studies.

**BIBLIOGRAPHY**


**biography |** Alexandra Rodney is a PhD candidate in the Department of Sociology at the University of Toronto. Her dissertation work looks at how healthy-eating discourses are produced in women’s digital and print media. This work explores questions about how health media function as teaching tools, how prosumer health discourses differ from those in commercial publications and how authenticity is produced on healthy living blogs. Learn more about Alexandra’s work [HERE](#).