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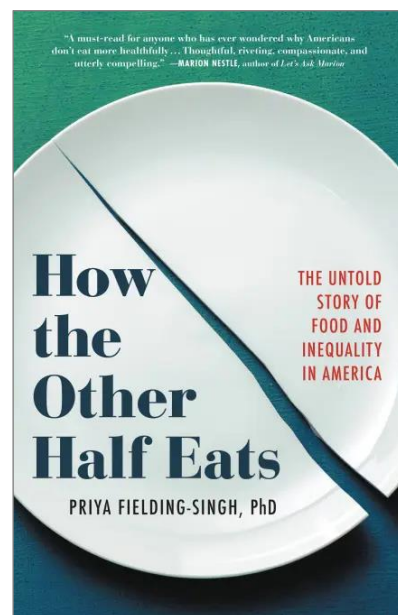
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Food inequality: One part of a much larger problem

Review by Jules Hathaway *
 University of Maine

Review of *How the Other Half Eats: The Untold Story of Food and Inequality in America*, by Priya Fielding-Singh. (2021). Published by Little, Brown Spark. Available as hardback, trade paperback, eBook, and audiobook; 352 pages. Publisher's website, which includes a reading group guide: <https://www.littlebrown.com/titles/priya-fielding-singh-phd/how-the-other-half-eats/9781549183225/>



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In 2014, researchers ascribed the growing nutritional inequality in America to two factors: the price of wholesome foods and geographic inaccessibility for families living in food deserts (Wang et al., 2014). Priyah Fielding-Singh believed that the causes had to be much more complex than that. As a doctoral student in sociology at Stanford University, she conducted an ethnographic study that involved interviewing 160 parents and children and extensively observing four families. Her findings, reported in *How the Other Half Eats: The Untold Story of Food and Inequality in America*, reveal

* Jules Hathaway is in the Higher Education Student Services program with a focus on campus food insecurity. Hathaway has been involved with the campus food pantry, the Black Bear Exchange, for over a decade. They attended a Universities Fighting World Hunger conference in 2019 and had a poster accepted for the 2020 conference, but the COVID-19 pandemic prevented that presentation. They can be contacted at University of Maine; 6 Marble Road, Veazie, ME 04401 USA; +1-207-944-6165; julia.hathaway@maine.edu

the complexity of causes, as she was expecting, of growing nutritional inequality. She also addresses the need to see food inequality as one interconnected facet of socioeconomic inequality rather than as a standalone problem.

In Part 1, *Divides*, Fielding-Singh introduces the four families she observed in depth. She disproves some popular theories that experts use to explain food inequalities that portray lower-income parents as uncaring or ignorant. Among the families she interviewed and observed, there was no class difference in commitment to child welfare. There was also general agreement on what constitutes a healthy diet. As to the geographic and cost factors considered to be the determinants of food inequality, cost emerges as one key factor among many, while proximity does not seem to matter. Nearly all the families she interviewed had access to a car and the willingness to drive further to get better quality food.

In Part 2, Nourishment, Fielding-Singh explores some not-so-obvious factors in nutrition decisions. One involves the role of parents in vetoing or allowing fast food in a world of abundance or a world of scarcity. Upper-income parents agree to most of their children's requests, such as summer camp. For a low-income parent, fast food may be the only request she can afford to agree to. There are also cultural associations that lead to foods highly similar in calories and nutritional value falling on opposite sides of the good food/bad food divide.


Part 3, Compromises, explores some important constraints on the parents in charge of nutrition, usually the mothers. Working mothers at all points on the economic spectrum felt time pressure but dealt with it in different ways. Low-income mothers with physically demanding jobs and neighborhood perils from which to protect children were the most likely to default to fast food. The most affluent mothers outsourced at least part of their food work, using money to compensate for lack of time. Immigrant mothers faced formidable cultural tensions when deciding whether to feed their children traditional foods, American foods, or a combination of both.

Fielding-Singh had expected that low-income parents would experience more anxiety about feeding their children than their high-income peers. However, evidence pointed to the opposite. In Part 4, Emotions, she presents psychological reasons for this paradox centered around the concepts of downscaling and upscaling. Downscaling is achieved by parents who routinely experience extreme stressors such as job losses and evictions. It involves feeling good about what they can accomplish rather than bad about where they fall short. More privileged parents upscale, raising parenting standards in all things, including feeding. Related insights are that privileged parents, who see control as a possibility, will see it as an obligation, and that for parents facing challenges such as dangerous neighborhoods and extreme poverty, correct feeding of children

might not be as high priority.

Section 5, Where We Go, outlines a plan for resolving food precarity and inequality. It presents nutritious food as a fundamental human right that must be addressed at the societal rather than individual level. Policy changes are essential components. Affordable housing, a living wage, sick and vacation leave, preschool, and health care for all would go far toward achieving this goal. The corporations that relentlessly market unhealthy foods to children must be held accountable. We all must shift the way we talk about other people's food choices from individual blame and shame to a voice of compassion and affirmation.

Although Fielding-Singh initially sought with this book to show that cost and geographic accessibility are not the only factors in food inequality, the biggest contribution she made to current understanding and future research is her embedding throughout the book the idea that this problem is only one facet of a larger problem of socioeconomic inequality. Some of the places where this is most obvious are her reminder in Section 2 that parents make food decisions within the context of a total environment of abundance or scarcity, her suggestion in Section 4 that other sources of inequality such as housing may outweigh nutrition as a source of concern, and in section 5 the depth and breadth of the changes she considers necessary.

The extent and intersectionality of Fielding-Singh's research make this book relevant for many fields, such as sociology, social work, education, higher education (campus food insecurity), psychology, food systems, community development, and economics. It is more for the practitioner than the academic researcher. Fielding-Singh meant for the book to be user-friendly for people without advanced degrees. Activists in the areas of women's rights and antiracism will find much to inspire their important and necessary work. It would also be an enjoyable read for undergraduates in food science or sociology classes. 

Reference

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