Food insecurity and urban poverty in New Zealand: A scholar-activist engagement

Alex McConville
Shiloh Groot
University of Auckland, New Zealand

There is little in-depth knowledge as to what inhibits impoverished families from obtaining sufficient food to eat healthily. This discussion paper provides an overview of the social and policy circumstances that create and maintain food poverty in New Zealand. We attempt to locate some answers to this issue by engaging scholars and practitioners working alongside families with on-going food insecurity. A qualitative meta-analysis comprising a comprehensive literature review was conducted alongside key informant interviews with experienced scholar-activists to contribute to the development of a more in-depth understanding of this complex social issue. We contend that food insecurity and urban poverty are troubling realities for many families in New Zealand and are exacerbated by structural constraints. We argue, as current and future psychologists engaging in concerns critical to community wellbeing, we need to situate our work within local socio-political contexts.

While we find ourselves situated in a world that produces enough food to feed every man, woman and child sufficiently (Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations, 1996), we simultaneously find ourselves located in a system that fails to ensure it is realised. This is not a condition limited to the developing world. Certainly, in New Zealand – a country abundant in food choices – many thousands of families struggle to satisfy this need (Wynd, 2005). Food and nutrition have long been recognised as critical to health; in recent years their contribution to health inequalities in wealthy, industrialised countries has been more widely acknowledged and better characterised (Dowler & O'Connor, 2011). However, in terms of the way policy-makers understand and respond to such inequalities and the varying ways in which they often fail to relate economic and social conditions to food and nutrition experiences remains contested (Dowler & O'Connor, 2011). This discussion paper responds to calls from Indigenous and community psychologists to move beyond the individual level of analysis by attending to the historical, political and socio-economic contexts in which peoples' lives are embedded (Groot, Rua, Masters-Awatere, Dudgeon, & Garvey, 2012).

To gain an appreciation of factors impacting on the lives of those who are food insecure, we explore scholarly literature, media items, and not-for-profit organisations and government reports pertaining to community health inequalities that create situations of food insecurity and are exacerbated by urban poverty. This qualitative meta-analysis (Paterson & Canam, 2001) is crucial when attempting to conceptualise food insecurity for impoverished families as one must acknowledge and assess the complex interplay of various socio-political factors. Further, this level of analysis allows us to piece together the varying discourses in New Zealand around poverty and food insecurity. Families struggling to feed themselves are not entirely in control of their situation as the decisions affecting their lives are routinely made over and above them by people entirely removed from their lifeworlds (Groot, 2010). It is through cooperative action and advocacy that we, as critical community psychologists, seek to close societal divides and establish greater opportunities for marginalised peoples. This position echoes Martín-Baró's (1994) definition of liberation psychology as

"a paradigm in which theories don't define the problems of the situation; rather, the problems demand or select their own theorization" (p. 314).

The individualistic tendencies in positive-orientated psychologies have been criticised for leading to the promotion of self-absorption and narcissism (Becker & Marecek, 2008) by claiming that through personal effort the individual can transcend their material, economic, and social circumstances. This approach can obscure the impact of inequitable social structures on causing food insecurity, further entrenching people within conditions of poverty (Hodgetts, Sonn, Curtis, Nikora, & Drew, 2010). In moving to adjust the focus from individual problems associated with 'poor people', this paper seeks to contribute to broader scholar-activists efforts to understand and address the structural impacts of poverty in New Zealand. For example, researchers have documented for the past decade systemic exclusions in housing policy for impoverished urban populations (Kearns, Smith, & Abbott, 1991; Cheer, Kearns, & Murphy, 2001); food poverty for rural populations (Carne & Mancini, 2012), the overrepresentation of Indigenous and racialised minority groups in homelessness and poverty (Groot et al., 2012; Cheer et al., 2001); and health inequalities for homeless people and poor households (Hodgetts, Stolte, Nikora, & Groot, 2012; Hodgetts, Chamberlain, Tankel, & Groot, 2013).

In line with the scholar-activist tradition (Murray, 2012) this paper challenges psychology to extend its focus to challenge the broader structural constraints explicitly implicated in communities. First, we consider urban poverty as a key driver in food security. Second, we deconstruct dominant ideologies surrounding food insecurity. Third, we outline our methodology for scholar-activism. Fourth, our analysis investigates polarising dichotomies between the 'deserving' and 'undeserving' poor. Fifth, we explore the limited agentic strategies available to families for obtaining food within systemically constrained lifeworlds. We conclude the paper with a discussion of the importance of advocacy for communities experiencing food insecurity.

Food Insecurity and Urban Poverty

Urban poverty has been identified by the World Health Organisation ([WHO], 2010) as the most pressing public health concern today and it is socio-economic status that is argued to be the greatest driver in the extent to which food insecurity becomes a lived reality (Wynd, 2005). Food insecurity broadly refers to the degree in which the ability to access adequate, nutritious, and affordable food becomes compromised or constrained (Carter, Kruse, Blakey, & Collings, 2011; Gareau, 2004). In New Zealand, poverty has grown 2.5 times faster than the Organisation of European Co-operation and Development (OECD) annual average (1%) over the last few decades (Ministry of Social Development, 2006; OECD, 2011, 2012). The top 10% of income earners had annual increases of 2.5% whereas the bottom 10% had increases of 1.1%. This causes a stretch effect or increased inequity, with the rich getting richer and the poor getting poorer. Māori and Pasifika peoples are overrepresented in the bottom 10% (Hodgetts et al., 2013).

In New Zealand, Māori and Pasifika peoples bear the harshest consequences of recessions and poverty. They are more likely to live in areas of deprivation where access to nutritious foods and quality supermarkets are limited and supply of fast food is abundant (Bidwell, 2009). The arrangement of a typical urban, and more specifically socially deprived urban environment, is one in which corporations have extensive geographical and spatial influence so as to encourage calorie dense, nutritionally poor eating habits which are often less costly than healthier options (Caraher & Coveney, 2004; Drewnowski, Monsivais, Maillot, & Darmon, 2007).

The majority of people who come to be

food insecure and in need of assistance are beneficiaries. Low paid workers are also increasingly becoming food insecure likely due to rising rental costs which often overtake incomes (Wynd, 2005). Research suggests that families with limited capacity to save money are five times more likely to be food insecure than households that have the capacity to save (Nolan, Williams, Rikard-Bell, & Mohsin, 2006). Furthermore, low incomes often lead to increased debt, and people who experience food insecurity typically face high levels of debt alongside gambling problems, or living with others who gamble (Wynd, 2005). It is of no coincidence then, that vulnerable communities and areas of urban deprivation are more likely to have significantly higher concentrations of gaming machines (Francis Group, 2009).

Being food insecure can lead to increased psychological distress (Carter et al., 2011), and poorer overall health compared to those who are food secure (Temple, 2008). For example, Molcho, Gabhainn, Kelly, Friel, and Kelleher (2006) found that food insecure children were significantly more likely to experience an increase in mental and somatic symptoms. Food insecurity can also lead to increasing rates of obesity (Drewnowski & Specter, 2004). While this may seem counter intuitive, people forced to 'choose' between high cost, high quality, nutrient rich foods or low cost, low quality, nutrient poor, energy-dense foods, are more likely to purchase the latter due to issues of affordability.

Socio-economic deprivation also has direct links with other factors related to food insecurity such as limited access to transport, limited ability to acquire adequate storage facilities, lack of time to shop for, prepare, and cook food, and a lack of means to buy food in bulk (Nolan et al., 2006). For instance, families that earn on or around minimum wage, working multiple jobs, and spending significantly longer hours during a

typical working week in order to cover basic living costs, will by proxy have less time to engage in food secure practices and may have less means to afford adequate storage, such as quality refrigeration.

Framing Food Insecurity

While current public discourse guiding government responses revolves around the idea that people in urban poverty have merely made 'poor choices' (Trevett, 2011), or seek to 'live the dream' of a government subsidised life (Hartevelt, 2010), the reality is far more complex. Such positions are cemented in an ideology of individual responsibility that neglects the broader structural implications played out in personal lifeworlds (Birn, 2009). We must acknowledge and include the extent to which socio-economic status, environmental and historical contexts contain deep and inextricable constraints that contribute to structure and direct many facets of the lifeworlds of people in urban poverty.

The political landscape is such that structural decisions are often made which benefit some and fail others. When said decisions render those who already find themselves situated in socio-economically fragile conditions worse off, the repercussions can be damaging. Governmental restrictions on benefit eligibility, tighter rules for extra assistance, the introduction of loans to replace grants, applying charges for governmental services that were previously free, and increases of state house rents to market levels all place considerable pressure on those already struggling on low incomes (Downtown Community Ministry, 1999; Square, 1999).

Power plays a central role in realising wellness, resisting oppression, and cultivating the conditions for liberation at personal, relational, and collective levels (Prilleltensky, 2008). Realising wellness in terms of attaining food security means recognising that in order to foster liberation for families entrenched in poverty we need to

find mechanisms that reduce poverty and address the needs of our growing underclass (Prilleltensky, 2008). The underclass emerges from economic and social deprivation and encompasses substance miss-users, mental health clients, and long-term recipients of welfare (the permanent poor) (Auletta, 1999). Addressing the circumstances that create food insecurity need to be recognised at service and societal levels synonymous with our obligations to respect, protect, and fulfil international human rights (Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations, 1996). The United Nations General Comment 14 on the right to the highest attainable standard of health as well as the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) both include food as essential components for procuring adequate levels of health. Policy decisions that positively impact urban poverty can lead to a noticeable amelioration in food insecurity. The 1991 New Zealand benefit cuts, which led many people to find themselves in debt, created a direct and exponential increase in the number of non-profit organisations assuming sole responsibility for the distribution of food to people in need through foodbank initiatives (Wynd, 2011).

Macro-level restructuring of welfare entitlements led to the rapid increase of foodbanks providing directly for micro-level needs. Foodbanks provide a crucial and life-saving service to families in need and are politically sanctioned. However, the system is not challenged and the broader structures remain in place where instead poverty is increasingly framed as a charity issue rather than one of human rights. This leads to the further entrenchment of systemic practices that perpetuate structures disabling people's ability to exercise greater depths of agency (Giddens, 1984). As a result, people who must repeatedly access foodbanks to alleviate hunger for themselves and their families become embedded in the "enduring cycles of reproduced relations" (Giddens, 1984, p. 131) that both continue to proliferate social systems as well as effectively trapping people.

The neoliberal welfare reforms implemented in 1999 further embedded and strengthened the reforms of the early 1990s. These reforms worked towards having people move from welfare to work. Here, the narrative of welfare shifted away from the promotion of community health. Traditionally, welfare allowed unemployed and disadvantaged people to attain an acceptable living standard, and to feel a sense of communal belonging. The reforms, in contrast, went on to portray beneficiaries as inhibiting economic growth and strongly urged them to become self-reliant, responsible, and to look after themselves (St John & Wynd, 2008). New Zealand, Australia, and Britain are categorised as `liberal welfare states' as they provide means-tested and partial forms of social assistance (Cheer et al., 2001). Yet these countries straddle an ambiguous division between pioneering welfare state development and the limited provision of social assistance programmes.

In New Zealand, both the *Working for Families* and *Working New Zealand* reforms focus on providing work incentives and childcare subsidies for low-income workers, but fail to provide concrete measures for raising families out of poverty. While simply replacing welfare with paid work helps address superficial normative ideologies of how the urban poor ought to construct and conduct their everyday lives, such changes do not address the underlying problem of income distribution – the real driver of urban poverty (St John & Wynd, 2008). For example, in the early 2000s, many New Zealand beneficiaries moved into paid employment as a result of the strong labour market. Poverty, however, continued to increase by 36% over the four year period (Ministry of Social Development, 2006,

2008). On the ground, the trend of mostly stationary or falling real incomes over the last 20 years for low-wage workers and beneficiaries continues to prove insufficient to meet the most basic of needs in New Zealand. This has been further amplified with rising unemployment and reduced working hours due to the recent global economic crisis (Wynd, 2011), alongside rising living costs, debts, house prices and rents (Wynd, 2005).

With this in mind, it must be recognised and reinforced that those who find themselves in the lived experience of food insecurity, do so predominately because their income is not sufficient to meet basic requirements; an over-determined effect of conditions imposed upon them from actors and interests that reside beyond them. Indeed, food insecurity is contingent upon and influenced by broader contexts, such as the economic and social environments, the built urban environment, and the quality and accessibility to civil services such as *Work and Income New Zealand*. Given that socio-economic status is influenced and shaped by wider political, social, and economic forces, the state of food insecurity and associated health inequalities are intrinsically unfair and unjust.

The sections above have laid the foundation for this paper in which we advocate the importance of understanding the context in which people experiencing food insecurity are situated. This raises an inter-related range of social determinants of health, including physical hardship, social and economic exclusions, educational difficulties, under-employment, stigma, stress, and food insecurity. Often research looks at these issues in isolation. We illustrate how a richer picture emerges when looking at issues in concert, particularly when grappling with the complexities of food insecurity within impoverished communities.

Method

This discussion paper is aligned alongside others within the scholar-activist tradition in its departure from traditional epistemological approaches in psychology that emphasise scientific, individualised, and apolitical approaches, to a psychology that extends its focus to challenging structural constraints seemingly beyond, yet explicitly implicated in communities (Murray, 2012). We employ a qualitative meta-analysis (Paterson & Canam, 2001) in our approach to making sense of food insecurity and urban poverty. This moves us beyond the individual level of analysis and aims to examine critical community problems in context; exploring the social, cultural, and political dimensions of human issues. In broadening and deepening our understandings of families' experiences of hardship, we include a richer comprehension of how lives tie into-and are tied up by-the broader social tapestry that binds them (Groot, 2010).

Given the relative paucity of research pertaining to issues of food insecurity in New Zealand, we reviewed a comprehensive literature base (academic literature, media items, and not-for-profit organisations and government reports) to draw together various threads of information. With notable exceptions, such as the *Australian Community Psychologist's* special section on critical community psychology approaches to poverty reduction (Fryer & McCormack, 2013), studies conducted are almost entirely quantitative. As a result, these studies may prove less liable to transmit a real sense of the phenomenology of being situated and entrenched in urban poverty. Furthermore, mechanistic and reductionistic methodologies can unintentionally lead academics to develop research that can serve to blame victims for their circumstances (Jeppesen, 2009). This may act to both reinforce neoliberal governmental agendas and further undermine experiences of poverty and oppression.

The literature review was accompanied by two key informant interviews with scholar-activists (Murray, 2012) Marina and Tom (pseudonyms). Both have extensive knowledge and experience working with impoverished communities spanning decades. This qualitative meta-analysis allows us to bring together the varying threads of discourses on poverty in New Zealand – academic literature, media items, and not-for-profit organisations and government reports accompanied by the accounts of scholar-activists. We took an exploratory approach, drawing on secondary data and our own experiences working with marginalised people, in order to engage the broader discipline in a discussion of the social, cultural and political dimensions of food insecurity. Both Marina and Tom and the second author are currently engaged in a larger research project initiated and funded by a leading service provider in Auckland, New Zealand, conducted in collaboration with three universities. The larger project explores the complex lifeworlds of 100 families living in poverty (Hodgetts et al., 2013). It is from this perspective that the first author for this paper, an emerging researcher, wished to engage with experienced scholar-activists to gain a greater appreciation of how critical community psychologists can contribute to broader agendas for social change and justice. This is part of the traditional role in the social sciences of the public intellectual whereby we can provide scholarly support for local communities in developing a coherent and resourced response to the interwoven issues of social inequities, poverty and health.

In the next section, we discuss the constrained lifeworlds of impoverished families. This is set against a backdrop of intensified monitoring and regulation. Specifically, we address urban poverty as a key determinant of food insecurity. The following section relates to how being poor is hard and often unrecognised work, and the agentic strategies employed by impoverished families to obtain food. Following that, in the closing section, we use lessons gained from this to inform a wider discussion about advocacy in community research aimed at addressing poverty.

The 'Undeserving' Versus the 'Deserving' Poor

From Darwinian-derived assumptions that the unemployed suffered from hereditary weaknesses and immoral lifestyles in nineteenth century Britain, to the long-standing position in the United States that the impoverished are responsible for their own conditions through laziness and ignorance, OECD societies have a lengthy and recurring tradition of discriminating against those in need (Birn, 2009; Kim, 1998; McFadyen, 1998). Recent qualitative research with people experiencing poverty in urban centres throughout Canada found that participants believed other members of society typically perceive them as lazy, irresponsible, and in pursuit of an easy life (Reutter, Stewart, Veenstra, Love, Raphael, & Makwarimba, 2009). Similar processes of internalising stigma are all too common amongst New Zealand beneficiaries (Welfare Justice, 2010).

Appelbaum (2001) argues that a central discourse concerning people's attitudes towards, and policy making decisions surrounding, welfare assistance is governed by the degree to which recipients of such support are considered either 'deserving' or 'undeserving'. The 'deserving poor' tends to constitute a category composed almost solely of 'well-behaved' people, innocent children, and 'helpless' individuals with intellectual or physical impairments (Jeppesen, 2009). By contrast, the 'undeserving poor' comprise racialised groups such as immigrants,

refugees, and Indigenous peoples, as well as sex workers and so-called 'welfare mums' (Jeppesen, 2009). Hodgetts and colleagues (2012) argue that these positions often mirror the class from which the people making such assumptions derive. They contend that without taking into consideration the heterogeneity of needs expressed by the diversity of people emplaced in marginalised lifeworlds, responses are often geared in line with middle class norms and values, and fail to consider people with categorically different needs.

This discourse of who is at fault is further exemplified by dichotomies extending to impoverished parents' ability to care for their own children. This can be seen in rhetoric designed to create a distinction between 'good' and 'bad' parents. The current government, for example, has recently introduced new policy requiring all beneficiary parents to ensure that their children attend at least 15 hours a week in Early Childhood Education from the age of 3, or face their benefit being cut by half (Beehive, 2012). Implicit in this policy is an assumption that beneficiaries are not capable of caring for their children in a capacity equivalent to that of employed people, who have the right to choose how their children will be educated.

To be considered good and deserving, such families should be faultless and mothers should not be single by choice (Jeppesen, 2009). When engaging Marina on public discourse that positions mothers receiving food parcels as incompetent parents who have made bad choices, Marina spoke of her own interactions with families in a frontline capacity. She noted the intensified monitoring of young beneficiary mothers:

> I think it is a very comfortable armchair assumption. For a lot of the young women, staying home with a baby is very difficult. I mean, staying at home with a

baby is very difficult for anyone, but they [solo-beneficiary mothers] are watched much more carefully than say the young 18 year old woman from Remuera [an affluent and predominantly European suburb in Auckland] would be watched by CYFS [Child, Youth and Family Services]. They tend to be put immediately on their watch list, which puts you in a position of defence really which only makes things more difficult. You often find that children get fed before adults in a family, and fathers and mothers certainly go without food before their children.

Marina evokes the intensified nature of policing and regulation experienced by mother's who must depend on the state for assistance. Boyer (2006; cited in Hodgetts et al., 2013) unifies the body and issues of scale in the manoeuvres of welfare reform, from the macro scale of society to the micro scale of the body; the focus remains on individual behaviour while the social structures that cause increased inequities are obscured.

As is the case in many other countries, New Zealand's Indigenous people (Māori) and racialised immigrant groups (Pasifika Peoples) are over represented in lower socio-economic groups and are consequently most affected by food insecurity (Bidwell, 2009). Such groups are the targets of structural racism and are quickly categorised as the 'undeserving poor' (Jeppesen, 2009). In her interview, Marina spoke of the cultural and socio-economic complexities that are often ignored and dismissed when forming responses to such groups:

> Sometimes the 'choices' aren't theirs, you know? People can have no money because there has been a death in the family. Pacific Island families contribute to funeral costs [back home in the

Islands as well as in a new land]. Māori have tangi [Māori death rituals], and they have to travel and contribute koha [cultural requirement to provide a gift to the host marae]. There are often unexpected costs such as car registration. And if you've got to do that one week then you won't have money for food. Then there is the big winter power bill, or a school trip often puts families into hardship, or buying school shoes or winter uniforms. So, there are all sorts of legitimate reasons for the lack of food. I don't think that families ever intentionally don't want to feed their children. I mean, how anybody can even feed a family on the DPB [Domestic Purposes Benefit] is beyond me; there is just not enough money.

In New Zealand (Wynd, 2005) and elsewhere (Dowler, 2002), many responses towards poverty fall in line with a neoliberal ideology that predominately focus on individual responsibility and change (cooking, skills, nutritional education). When attempting to conceptualise food insecurity, one needs to acknowledge and assess the complex interplay of various social factors. As Marina illustrates in the above quote, these include cultural practices, socio-economic status, and – for marginalised Indigenous and migrant groups – the historical impacts of colonisation and migration to a hostile new country and re-settlement (Groot et al., 2012; Kearns et al., 1991).

In an experimental study, Appelbaum (2001) found that liberal policies were more likely to be recommended when the target group was considered deserving and, therefore, not responsible for their own poverty. This echoes Tom's consideration of the dominant narratives of food insecurity in

New Zealand, and to whom they benefit:
Clearly, individualising has a large function… we have this rhetoric around the notion that people can be successful and they can live reasonably well in this land of plenty, God's own etcetera, and if they fail to do that then somehow <u>they</u>, and not society, has failed… and while this individualising process makes them responsible for failure, it also allows people to claim personal responsibility for success… So John Key [current Prime Minister of New Zealand] grew up in a state house and the story around that is that "Anybody who grew up in a state house can make it like I have."

Both Marina and Tom throughout their accounts strongly contested references to personal deficits and failings and instead illustrated agency and constraint in the lives of families. However, such narratives that are centred on ideologies of individual responsibility; reflect a contemporary era where selfhood is often defined and expressed through the promotion and celebration of narcissism, selfishness, independence, and individualism (Howell & Ingham, 2001). Certainly, such overtly simplistic binaries between the 'deserving' and 'undeserving' poor affords the few 'individuals' who are able to move out of poverty the ability to be framed as successful, whilst simultaneously pointing a finger at people who cannot transcend their circumstances as the cause of their own predicament.

Agency and Struggle in the Lives of Impoverished Families

The concept of agency acknowledges intention as a primary factor in creating action; it similarly recognises that the world is not entirely malleable to the will of the

agent. Giddens and Pierson (1998) define agency as "the capability to have done otherwise" (p. 78). The ability to exercise agency is considerably more restrained for impoverished families in the face of domineering labour market and economic forces (Giddens & Pierson, 1998). However, to assume that families experiencing food insecurity are, as Prime Minister John Key recently asserted, making poor choices (Trevett, 2011), fails to acknowledge the agency demonstrated by the urban poor. Marina reflected on what such agentic strategies looked like for families whose lifeworlds were considerably constrained:

> Some people come in on the bus and then carry what is a big food parcel in a large box and we help them to break it down and catch a bus back home; it's quite a commitment. Carrying the baby and all the food goes in the pram and they walk home. I have one mum who walks to see me from Otara [to Otahuhu in South Auckland, 50 minute walk] every fortnight. So I always organise her appointment around my lunch time so I can drive her home with her parcel. Their commitment is quite strong; you've got to feed your family. A food parcel is meant to last a week… myself and my colleagues are not quite sure how you would make it last a week, but people are very clever at stretching them. Some women and men share wonderful stories of how they have used their food parcels and the good meals they have made.

Marina emphasised the varied strategies available to families, such as walking uncomfortable distances saddled with heavy food packages and children in tow. In the face of structural limitations, such as insufficient incomes and restricted food

parcels, we find resilient, creative, loving, and knowledgeable actors drawing upon their own supportive networks and resources to create situations of dignity (Jeppesen, 2009). Impoverished families often do seek to transform their conditions within severely limited means.

Research with beneficiaries in New Zealand has found that people often have very demeaning and unsatisfying experiences with government agencies when attempting to engage and receive support from them (Hodgetts et al., 2013; Presbyterian Services Otago, 2008). Research commissioned by the Presbyterian Services Otago (2008) reports the great lengths participants go to receive their full entitlements from welfare agencies, and often do not know about extra assistance available because of their limited access to such information. Tom similarly spoke of the sheer amount of obstacles impoverished families contend with when attempting to seek assistance from agencies:

> The number of agencies they have to deal with, and the number of agencies they are required to deal with, is immense. Alongside this, you have agencies they are caught up with through debts and all sorts of things, and then underneath that is how much work they have to do to be in touch with these agencies. And then you might be thinking, "Well they are supposed to be available to get a job or train or whatever," but then they have many other responsibilities such as going to hospital with a child. It's just a constant battle. There is a lot of time and energy caught up in being poor.

Prevailing narratives portray ill-health, unemployment and poverty as primarily

matters of individual failure and of personal responsibility (Mooney, 2009). In contrast, Tom draws our attention to hardship in other areas such as the importance of social capital and the way in which its lack can place significant psychological, emotional, and organisational strain on parents. Boon and Farnsworth (2011) assert that social capital or being connected to a network of people is not enough – it is the extent to which support systems are able to be utilised to create resource accessibility that is of greater significance. The authors contend that difficulties can arise when attempting to find employment that does not negatively impact on family responsibilities. Without close social networks parents cannot access crucial supports such as childcare.

A social fabric comprising strong and trusted networks of family, friends, and systemic supports is an important indicator as to the extent greater opportunities may be afforded for impoverished families in day-to-day life (Boon & Farnsworth, 2011). In the interview, Marina spoke of the agentic methods some families use such as "whole streets [neighbours] coming in one car" to collect food parcels. These ecologically-structured advantages are not, however, available to everyone, and should be taken into consideration by social scientists, policy makers, and service providers if we are to provide effective support or else we risk reframing social exclusion as 'self-exclusion' (Mooney, 2009).

Poverty is profoundly time consuming; it requires constant hard work and can be deeply distressing. While such realities are often obscured or simply unrecognised in popular discourse, their burden is continually carried by people facing hardship (Boon & Farnsworth, 2011). From dealing with the stress and anxiety of seldom having enough money to meet basic needs such as rent, power, food and hospital visits, to the intensely problematic nature of negotiating the challenges of seeking secure employment,

being poor is hard work (Presbyterian Services Otago, 2008). Time spent simply attempting to navigate the sheer number of obstacles encountered could be considered equivalent to a full time job in and of itself (Hodgetts et al., 2013). Marina provided an analogous account of the experience of time (or lack thereof) in a family's attempt to deal with food insecurity:

> They are pretty busy. For instance, appointments to try and get a food grant are probably up to a three hour wait each time. And if you have to walk there and walk back that's six hours of your day gone. Then you have children to look after and general housework to take care of but if you've got a family of even five to look after, it's beyond me. They are busy. Just maintaining clean clothes, washing the dishes, cleaning the house; they are busy people.

In the above excerpt, Marina references the significant amount of time one must exhaust in simply reaching service providers. People in poverty often walk due to a lack of car ownership (and to save on public transport costs), or simply because costs of running a car are often too great to justify maintenance (Presbyterian Services Otago, 2008). Furthermore, additional time is often expended through purchasing smaller amounts of food more frequently in order to help save larger food purchases being consumed too quickly, and to assist in freeing up any extra money available (Walker, 2005). Similarly, considerable time is also spent locating the cheapest items as there is no room to make errors or waste money (Nolan et al., 2006).

As outlined above, socio-economic status determines the degree to which food insecurity becomes a lived reality. Walker (2005) contests that while people of low socio-economic status recognise a higher

paid occupation or full-time employment as the best means to raise themselves out of poverty, practical barriers such as a lack of qualifications and/or access to childcare often prevent a way out. Tom elucidated how people become trapped in enduring cycles of poverty:

> Food insecurity is mostly about poverty, and having debt and insufficient income to actually deal with food. A lot of the families in our research have a very limited amount of money and what they use it for first is to keep a roof over their head, then they pay all the essential bills such as electricity and rent or they find ways of deferring them for a while if they haven't got enough money, but food often comes last.

In the excerpt above, Tom discusses the reality for many families whereby food becomes a discretionary item weighted against other equally pressing concerns crucial to survival (Presbyterian Services Otago, 2008). Tom goes on to make links between food and nutrition as critical to health (Dowler & O'Connor, 2012):

> Food insecurity, or better yet food insufficiency, has this idea of you don't know where the next meal is coming from but most of the families we are talking to know what food they have access to and some of it is just terrible. Not having enough food is often about not having access to enough of the right sort of food, so people will substitute food. People are living badly on the cheapest food they can get, like lots of cheap pot noodles and things like that and then there's a household at the centre of this, not a person… so food insecurity probably needs to be defined more collectively than just 'a person who is food

insecure' because around that person is usually a collection of other people.

Food policy in neoliberal states, such as New Zealand, is dominated by an individual choice model (Dowler & O'Connor, 2012). Trade and financial rights govern entitlement and the state's role is largely concerned with the regulation of the food supply and retail divisions. There is a disconcerting omission of food as an essential element of public health, even less so as central to citizens' rights and with little recognition of the food component to welfare (Dowler & O'Connor, 2012). Within this framework, the hegemonic discursive position is to question micro-level competencies within low income households through a focus on sufficiency of nutritional knowledge, one's ability to budget, shop, and cook or to make the 'appropriate choices' in shops stocking food (Presbyterian Services Otago, 2008). The pervasive underlying assumption here is that people have sufficient money to buy appropriate food (and therefore can make the 'appropriate choices'), yet the cost of food in relation to income is not regulated (Dowler & O'Connor, 2012).

Conclusion: Engaging Psychology

Food insecurity and urban poverty are inextricably intertwined and are exasperated by structural constraints. They occur and are maintained by a wide and complex range of factors such as multiple debts (Walker, 2005), low income (McPherson, 2006), a limited capacity to save money (Nolan et al., 2006), lack of adequately paid job opportunities (Wynd, 2005), lack of strong and trusted social networks (Boon & Farnsworth, 2011), and childcare obligations (Gingrich, 2008).

Food insecurity is a human rights issue. International human rights obligations should inform the governmental duty to ensure its people's food requirements are met (Dowler

& O'Connor, 2012). Here, adequate nutrition is tied to the right to health; the way in which international treaties and committees recognise this are important guidelines for policymakers to consider when addressing urban poverty. We argue against relocating explanations of critical public health concerns, such as illness and unemployment, from the public to the personal domain (Birn, 2009). Unproductive and disempowering explanations of such experiences due to personal failure or poor decision-making ignore the numerous elements at play over and above the individual (Howell & Ingham, 2001). Indeed, taking power and social context into account is paramount when seeking to explore human competence and well-being, and attempting to articulate adequate responses and interventions.

Within the limitations of a small explanatory study, we have attempted to respond to calls for a focus on the structural components of food insecurity as part of a broader discussion. Further research needs to take place with marginalised groups themselves to truly encapsulate a scholar-activist approach. We aimed to draw on a diverse knowledge base including academic literature and media and government reports as well as the accounts of experienced scholar-activists as a basis for conceptualising issues and developing responses. This is in support of a community psychology practice that engages and works with marginalised people in New Zealand. The points made through our meta-analysis express the importance of 'stepping back' and understanding people in relation to the larger systems in which they are situated. Impoverished lifeworlds are multifaceted, diverse, fail to fall into conveniently categorised dualities, and defy simple explanations such as individual incompetence.

Contrary to popular discourse, which paint the urban poor as lazy, stupid, and immoral (Birn, 2009; Howell & Ingham, 2001; McFadyen, 1998), being poor is

hard work. Parents often do extensive amounts of walking to and from food banks and a multitude of other agencies in order to provide for their families. Time is often spent looking for the cheapest items in supermarkets and smaller amounts are purchased due to a lack of finances, or to prevent eating too much at once. Alongside this, dealing with agencies such as *Work and Income New Zealand* can often be a demeaning and frustrating experience. Furthermore, the extent to which people are able to help themselves often depends on the strength of their social networks – having extensive and trusted social capital can help improve access to employment opportunities and ameliorate psycho-emotional stress (Boon & Farnsworth, 2011).

By including the broader facets of human experience we engender a psychology that is better equipped to capture the complexity of everyday life, in all its messiness and troublesome states of flux. As current and future psychologists, we need to situate our work within local socio-political contexts (Groot et al., 2012). It is from this vantage point that we may gain a richer and more humane view of the people we work with and for.

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Address for correspondence
Shiloh Groot
s.groot@auckland.ac.nz