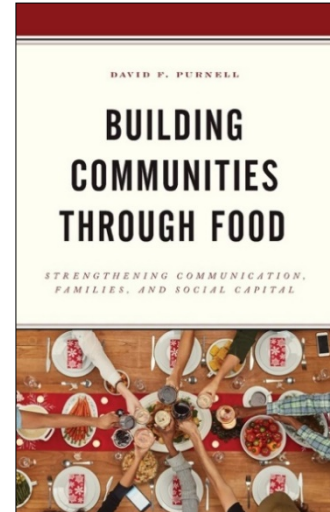


David F. Purnell, **Building Communities Through Food: Strengthening Communication, Families, and Social Capital**, Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2019, 137 pp., \$61.56 (hardcover).

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Does food have the potential to build connections and strengthen communities? This question sits at the heart of David Purnell's book **Building Communities Through Food: Strengthening Communication, Families, and Social Capital**. Drawing from 17 years of autoethnographic observations and interviews, Purnell offers an interesting case study of a neighborhood in Tampa Bay, Florida, where residents gathered weekly for what they call "family dinners." While there are points where Purnell could have offered more supporting evidence to undergird his arguments, the book offers value by raising timely questions about mechanisms for building community in the face of conflict, and the role of food as a facilitator of communication.



Throughout the book, Purnell returns to his argument for a "community-food effect" (p. 7). The sharing of meals, he argues, allows people to build social capital and a sense of place. Purnell draws on an interdisciplinary body of literature exploring the role of food as ritual and means of communication (e.g., Counihan, 1999; Douglas, 2002/1966; Ray & Srinivas, 2012). His exploration grew out of his own experience as one of the founders of a weekly neighborhood dinner. He recounts how he and a handful of neighbors began hosting dinners and how it mushroomed over the years to an expanding area of the neighborhood, and an expanding number of hosts and participants. Purnell argues that these dinners contributed to his own attachment to place and connection to community.

Purnell circles back to this case in a series of chapters that explore various dimensions of his argument. After an overview of the family dinners case and some key concepts in chapter 1, chapter 2 focuses on the social meaning of sharing food and its potential to act as a bonding agent to build family-like friendship networks. In chapter 3, Purnell makes an interesting claim challenging Ray Oldenburg's (1999) traditional definition of Third Places. Whereas Oldenburg saw third places as places that people gather informally and voluntarily outside of their home or work, Purnell argues the key criteria for place should be how a place is used. As such, he argues that in situations where homes are used for family dinners, they shift from first places to third places. Purnell follows this in chapter 4 by reflecting on food as a boundary—who did and did not attend the neighborhood dinners, and how their intervention fit within societal patterns around family and community gatherings. In chapter 5, Purnell offers more detail on his argument that sharing meals builds both bonding and bridging social capital, and in chapter 6, he argues that the dinners contributed to community participation and engagement. Finally, in chapter 7, he reviews the trajectory of the dinners and the role of sharing meals in families and societies, before ending in chapter 8 with an entirely distinct case of a food sustainability education program in a Vancouver school system.

While Purnell raises valuable concepts, the book at times suffers from trying to cover too much ground without going deep enough into the case example. Part of the issue is that despite drawing on some 17 years of participant observation and an interview project, there is not much deep description of the dinners themselves. We also do not hear directly from many of the dinner participants other than Purnell. He does acknowledge the challenges of reflecting on a phenomenon so close to him, and weaving in perspectives of participants “whose opinions were in opposition to my own” (p. 76). However, we rarely get to hear these voices that would add complexity and rich texture to his arguments. One would imagine given his many years of involvement that it would be fascinating to explore more perspectives from both longtime participants as well as others who may have stopped participating or never joined.

Purnell could have focused the entire book on family dinners as a case study of conflict resolution and bridging difference. Indeed, he mentions some revealing anecdotes about how neighborhood conflicts entered the family dinners circle. Several times he returns to the example of a dispute surrounding efforts to designate the neighborhood as a local historic district, and the process in which one quadrant of the neighborhood seceded and became its own separately designated neighborhood. Drawing on Goffman’s (1974) conceptualization of framing, he argued that the dinners influenced how participants formed frames that shaped their understanding of the conflict (p. 83). Purnell argues that participants were able to co-construct meaning regarding the neighborhood conflict and have more sociable discourse. At the same time, he explained that this conflict led a number of participants to stop or cut back on their participation in the dinners. Here it would have been interesting to include more detail about how these conversations unfolded.

It also would have been helpful to learn more about local dynamics of place and power—including more background on the neighborhood’s history, demographic composition (particularly race and class) in different parts of the neighborhood, and how these compared with the backgrounds of family dinner participants. As Purnell acknowledges at various points, food and the sharing of meals can either include or exclude, often along lines of class and culture. At times Purnell hints at participants’ backgrounds (different religious and political beliefs for example), and there is some indication that there may be variation in class background. For example, he discusses the ideal layout of a house for hosting family dinners, and how neighbors with smaller homes may have felt they could not act as hosts. It would be instructive to dig deeper into the backgrounds of dinner participants, or even to conduct a network analysis of participants to better understand how social capital flows between the strong and weak ties he references.

Purnell attempts to include a wide range of issues at the intersection of food and community—yielding a number of interesting reflections, but also some digressions and transitions that can feel jarring—like shifting from family dinners as third spaces to food access and food justice in chapter 3, or an interlude on Italian foodways and culture in chapter 4. Despite these limitations, Purnell makes a valuable contribution by offering a fascinating case of a neighborhood dinner series. Purnell’s fieldwork concluded just about the same moment a number of meal-sharing initiatives sprouted up in the U.S. following the divisive 2016 elections. From meals attempting to connect neighbors across political divides, or to introduce newer immigrant and refugee residents to longtime residents, a number of initiatives have been founded on a similar premise to Purnell’s “community-food effect” argument. Going forward, it would be interesting to chart how such efforts fare and what they may learn from the longevity of initiatives like the family dinners.

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