There is very little social science and humanities research on food allergy in contemporary society. This is surprising because the population affected by the condition globally is significant. Approximately 11 percent of adults in the United States have a food allergy. The social science literature about food allergy has emphasized the consequences of the governance and regulation of food allergies, drawing attention to how food-allergic lives are managed and how the "risks" associated with food allergy are articulated, debated, lived, and negotiated. Sociologists have also explored how definitions of food allergy have changed over time, arguing that those with conditions like food intolerance can experience their conditions as more challenging or problematic because they do not have recourse to the biomedical legitimacy accessible to those who have a real IgE-mediated (that is, caused by IgE allergy antibodies) allergy.

I have recently explored the persistence of uncertainty in the development of new treatments (such as immunotherapy) for food allergy and the coexistence of both avoidance and exposure treatment paradigms in the development of scientific and medical knowledge about food allergy. Historian Michael Smith also recently published an overview of the social science and humanities literature about food allergy, arguing for a more interdisciplinary approach to food allergy research that should involve social scientists and humanities scholars.

*Allergic Intimacies: Food, Disability, Desire, and Risk* builds on the limited social science and humanities literature about food allergy and reinvigorates exploration of the notion of "exclusion" as it relates to food allergy. The primary theoretical lens discussed throughout the book is crip theory. While not defined in the book, crip theory brings together disability studies and queer studies, "considering how certain bodily or mental experiences, in whatever location or period, have been marginalized, invisibilized, made pathological or deviant." Michael Gill explores how exclusion and inequality are made and reproduced through several different case studies, including, for example, representations of food allergy in...
children’s books. Gill argues that food allergy has been racialized and represented as a condition associated with whiteness. Citing epidemiological research that shows that people of color in the United States are disproportionately affected by food allergy and are excluded or invisibilized in contemporary representations of food allergy, he argues that this process of invisibilization has the potential to exacerbate health-care access inequalities for people of color.[6]

In contrast to most social science and humanities literature on food allergy, Gill's contribution is unique as he combines lengthy personal reflections on his experiences with food allergy and theoretical concepts from the crip paradigm through case studies in each chapter. In the initial chapters, the integration of both personal narrative and theoretical discussion and analysis is somewhat disjointed. As the chapters progress, personal reflection becomes more seamlessly integrated with Gill's theoretical insights and contributions. Engagement with the book requires familiarity with the crip framework and the theoretical constructs in this domain, so a glossary and/or an introduction to terms and concepts in this field would have been immensely helpful for readers relatively unfamiliar with the new crip paradigm.

Chapter 2 is a case study of how whiteness has constituted representations of food allergy in children's books. Gill's argument could have been bolstered via the presentation of visual evidence reinforcing this claim. The argument of this chapter is compelling nonetheless as Gill demonstrates how children's stories about food allergy typically conclude with accommodations made for those who are allergic to food by their peers. Gill argues that the children's book narratives about "communal acceptance" and accommodation of food allergy are also narratives of whiteness. He notes that these stories exclude or make invisible the potentially more realistic accounts of bullying and isolation children actually experience as a result of their food allergies. Gill concludes that there is a need for children's stories that convey and represent diverse adverse experiences with food allergy. While his argument is compelling, a question arises as to whether children's texts can be racialized and not automatically or deterministically confer racial privilege in practice and/or have the severe and detrimental consequences to which Gill refers throughout.

The major strengths and unique contributions of the book are revealed in the later chapters and while the focus of Gill's arguments is still centered on whiteness and the ways it constitutes representations of food allergy in contemporary society, the discussions shift to topical focuses that have remained relatively unexplored in the social science literature about food allergy, including its intersections with the topics of sex, desire, and death. A topic relatively absent from clinical literature concerns intentionality and desire, as allergenic foods are typically defined a priori as "risky" for those who are allergic to them, and it is assumed they are avoided in their entirety among those who are allergic to them. Gill demonstrates how individuals negotiate simultaneously the demands of pleasure and risk in their consumption behaviors. These potentially contradictory or co-occurring demands have been explored in other fields, such as consumption and food studies, and a useful addition to the theoretical repertoire presented in Gill's book could have included reference to consumption studies' exploration of the practices of "edgework," from Stephen Lyng's Edgework: The Sociology of Risk-Taking (2005).

The final substantive chapter of the book is particularly compelling, noting how despite the media's coverage of allergic-related deaths there has been a complete absence of exploration of how structural inequalities (for instance, peer pressure) or other social forces affect individuals' consumption decisions and subsequent deaths. Gill makes a compelling case that further research is needed to understand how the structural, systemic inequalities in contemporary society are
made invisible and furthermore what the consequences of this invisibility are for our understanding(s) of food allergy in contemporary society.

Gill’s *Allergic Intimacies* is a unique contribution to the social science and humanities literature on food allergy in form and in content. As a sociologist and researcher who has researched the field of food allergy extensively and who is also food allergic, I found Gill’s personal narratives and theoretical insights validating and normalizing on a personal level, particularly as I engaged with the later chapters regarding the demands and potential(s) of both food-allergic risks and pleasures in consumption—a topic often neglected in the clinical domain and with regard to biomedical approaches to food allergy. Gill introduces readers to refreshingly new analytical frameworks and conceptual devices to comprehend food allergy in contemporary society that are distinctly hopeful, such as through references to the potential(s) for cultivating what Mia Mingus has called “access intimacy.”[7] Gill’s contribution will be particularly useful, interesting, and compelling for food-allergic individuals; clinicians and healthcare professionals engaged with food-allergic pediatric, youth, and adult populations; scholars in consumption and food studies; and social science and humanities scholars.

Notes


If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at
https://networks.h-net.org/h-sci-med-tech


URL: https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=58961

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.