Searching for Food (Justice):
A qualitative case study of the food environment in a low-income micro-neighborhood in Long Island City, NY

by

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Abstract

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Problems of food access, food insecurity and hunger, are linked to numerous adverse health outcomes including increased rates of morbidity and mortality due to diet related diseases. In addition, these inequities highlight social justice problems, such as spatial segregation and neighborhood deprivation, within the larger food system. This project aims to explore the links between food systems, access, and food practices among low-income residents living in an underserved food environment in order to better understand the current barriers and struggles related to accessing healthy and desirable foods.

This project focuses on the Queensbridge micro-neighborhood located within the larger neighborhood of Long Island City, in Queens, NY. Given the complexity of the issues surrounding the food system and the differential impacts on people across various socio-economic statuses the aims of this study include gaining a better understanding of the issues and processes involved among low-income community members related to the ways in which they source and consume food in the conventional and alternative food systems. The primary research questions informing this dissertation are: what are participants' perceptions of their food environment(s), particularly around the areas of

quality, value, and taste of available products? What are the socio-cultural factors present in the micro-neighborhood that gets inscribed into the food environment, and how do these characteristics influence purchasing decisions? And, what is the level of awareness, attitudes toward and use of alternative food networks (AFNs) among community members? I will address these questions through conducting participant observation, in-depth interviews, and archival research with members of a community-based advocacy organization, as well as community members living in and around the Queensbridge micro-neighborhood, and staff members and volunteers of area community-based organizations. Findings in this dissertation focus on participants' perceptions and experience of the food environment in this community utilizing a food justice framework to interrogate the forms of race and class based differences that undergird residents' food practices.

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Prologue

The experiences of food and eating are so quotidian that they are easily taken for granted, but in recent years there has been a growing attention and even enthusiasm around this topic in both scholarship and popular culture. More recently, there has been a turn towards investigating the intimate and social nature of various aspects of food practices acknowledging its important place and related impacts on all aspects of life. Food for everyone is sustenance – essential for maintaining life - for others, it is a source of deep personal and social pleasure, and yet, for some, it is a source of great concern for reasons ranging from an interest in quality, to the fundamental issue of having access to enough food. The growing attention to these varied aspects of food have spawned a multi-vocal food movement(s) that seeks to address themes of food from pleasure, to health to justice, and not without controversy across and within these personal, social, and political projects.

Much of the discourse around these various aspects of food reflect or reproduce dominant voices that marginalize subjects with less social power and visibility. Public health discourses, for instance, focus on the health related outcomes community members must navigate in relation to food but, at times, de-contextualize the act of eating in ways that become counter productive to the goals of health promotion. That is to say, people do not make food choices based on health alone and attion to values, motivations, skill, knowledge, interest, and sense of pleasure among other intrapersonal qualities are often given short shrift in comparison to the equally important issues of nutritional quality and food access. This condition can lead to discourses and policy that, while aiming to promote the well-being of all, miss the mark and create top-down interventions that do not adequately serve the people intended but, rather, contribute to conditions that can be seen as stigmatizing or victim-blaming further alienating those whose health they seek to promote.

Food movements that have emerged to address and amend these concerns and seek to knit together the issues of food and health along with factors such as environmental sustainability, increased attention to quality of food, and concern over matters of production are adding to and creating new discourses of food. Yet, at the same time, these discourses may often still reproduce the power structure embedded within the larger food system, encoding food with class and race-based notions of values and practices related to food. These movements endeavor to be inclusive, yet it is perhaps their enthusiasm for the aesthetic aspects of food that are constructed as universal that ultimately undermine the larger aims of food justice. This zeal in the absence of reflexivity can and often does lead to the marginalization of those who have greater challenges in procuring food in everyday life. Thus, these more aesthetic or otherwise value driven orientations of provisioning ignore the structures and contexts that shape food related priorities for those concerned more about the ability to access enough affordable food in the conventional food environment. Indeed, this can be a great challenge in itself that can be minimized in some food movement discourses.

Given the dominance of certain voices over others in contemporary food (culture and health) discourses, I attempt to make visible individuals whose experiences have tended to be on the periphery and yet have as much skin in the game as other stakeholders attempting to describe and determine the terrain of food in contemporary society. I became interested in this facet through my own work in community related and alternative food issues. I have always been passionate about food and, as a public health professional, am aware of the serious issues of related health outcomes in the conventional food system that seeks to promote convenience and profit over wellbeing. Given the dominance of this system, I have engaged with alternative food networks (AFNs) including farmers markets where I have worked for farmers for several years supporting their efforts to build a stronger local food system that addresses issues of environment and production practices. I have also been closely involved with my local CSA (community supported agriculture) as a member and core-group volunteer in order to provide greater support

to farmers as well as participate in creating space for community and connection through and with food. Most recently, I have been involved in co-founding a food cooperative that seeks to create a meaningful alternative to conventional grocery stores and increase access to high quality, ethically sourced foods in western Queens, NYC.

These activities have been incredibly exciting and have provoked a reflexivity that has inspired and challenged me. Through this work, I have seen that these "on the ground" food provisioning practices can touch individuals and communities in significant ways. At the same time, as inclusive as these projects aim to be – and all of them have, to some extent, explicitly intended to support and increase diversity and promote justice in some way – they have, through various means and to varying extents, reproduced divisions of power that exist in the larger food system. As a person of color myself, I have reflected on the whiteness and middle-class environments that are re-inscribed into the alternative food spaces I have encountered and have wondered where the others that "look" more like me are? I have also experienced the stigma that comes along with navigating access to financial support in these so-called inclusive food projects that in practice cater to more financially well-resourced community members.

This research adds to the ongoing discussions of food with a focus on the experience of food in the context of both conventional and alternative food environments. This work seeks to excavate the socio-structural aspects of the food system as they shape food experience for a community that has fewer resources and less visibility in the dominant food discourse. Specifically, this study examines the experience of community members in a low-income, predominantly minority micro-neighborhood in western Queens, NY. This study provides an ethnographic analysis of participants engaged in food and poverty related advocacy in the Queensbridge/Ravenswood housing developments in Long Island City, NY, as well as activities at a CSA in this community along with informal and in-depth interviews with residents,

volunteers, and professionals of local community based organizations that address issues in this food environment.

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Introduction

"For now I ask no more than the justice of eating." -- Pablo Neruda

Background

Food Justice

Food is a critical factor in maintaining health and well-being, as well as an important element for quality of life. Yet, access to adequate, appropriate, and healthy foods is constrained in many urban communities in the United States with one in six individuals facing hunger (Feeding America, Accessed on 9/22/2012). It is estimated that in 2010, approximately 1.3 million New Yorkers faced hunger during that year (City Harvest, Accessed on 9/22/2012). Problems of hunger and food access, also referred to as food insecurity, are linked to numerous adverse health outcomes including increased rates of morbidity and mortality due to diet related diseases (Adams et al. 2003, Kwate 2008, Raja et al. 2010). In addition, these inequities highlight social injustices such as spatial segregation, systematic community disinvestment and neighborhood deprivation within the larger food system dominated by the conventional retail infrastructure, which supplies food to the general public (Brown et al 2008).

Food justice as a concept examines food security in "the contexts of institutional racism... and racialized geographies" (Alkon & Norgaard, 2009, p 289). Alkon and Norgaard point out the ways in which institutional racism creates spaces that constrain access to healthy and high quality food in the conventional food system for low-income people of color. As a result, residents of these underserved neighborhoods consume

nutrient poor and energy dense foods such as processed and fast foods. Wekerle (2004: 378) adds that food justice reframes food security to include a rights-based framework wherein the right to food is seen as "a component of a more democratic and just society". In addition, Allen (2008: 157) identifies the need to incorporate social justice in food movements and suggests "[food] justice involves meeting basic human needs, freedom from exploitation and oppression, and access to opportunity and participation". Thus, the work of food justice activists seeks to not only address issues of access at the neighborhood level but also has a more comprehensive political vision that incorporates systemic change at multiple levels including the local, state, and global scales.

Allen points out that scholars may play an important role in food justice struggles by engaging with public issues and "[making] the invisible visible" (p 159). She calls on scholars to address food justice in multiple contexts, including education and research, by foregrounding the social justice aspects of the food system that affect everyone's lives regardless of race, class, or gender. It is this call to scholars by Allen that has motivated me to conduct an activist research project that utilizes a food justice framework to examine the ways in which community members in an undeserved neighborhood experience their food environment. This project is concerned with food justice focusing on the food environment in a low-income community in Queens, NY that is underserved by the conventional food system. My aim is to expand knowledge of how underserved food environments are experienced and navigated, increase awareness of food justice issues in Queens, NY, and identify factors that can effectively address problems of food access.

Food systems inequities and the food environment

"In America, people will let you get awful hungry, but they never quite let you starve."

--Woody Guthrie

The seminal study conducted by Moreland et al. (2002) examined food environments and their related impacts on health outcomes for people living in low-income minority communities. The study examined the types of food stores and services available at the community level in 221 census tracts looking at supermarkets (large, corporate owned chains), grocery stores (smaller scale, independently owned stores), convenience stores, specialty food stores (e.g. produce markets), and full service and fast food restaurants. The results of this study indicated that the types of food service resources available varied by the wealth and racial makeup of the community. That study highlighted the role of race and class in the food environment and outlines the inequities that constrain the choices available to residents in underserved neighborhoods.

There is a growing awareness of inequities in food environments, often referred to as "food deserts," which is linked to poor health outcomes. Shaw (2006) examines the notion of food deserts and to what extent they actually exist given the lack of clarity around its definition. She notes that the initial use of the term food desert began in the UK and referred to spaces that presented barriers to accessing healthy foods. She goes on to point out that this term was quickly taken up in the policy discourse even though there is limited research to document or further clarify the nature of and existence of food deserts. Indeed, the term *food desert* is widely used in literatures of health and food access, as noted below in a review of literature focused on articles using this particular term. Yet, there has been limited discussion about how useful this term is, let alone a

critical discussion of how problematic it might be to evoke the image of a desert to describe a food environment. This project, while acknowledging the prominent role of the concept of food deserts in the discourse of food, health and policy, will begin to critically examine the notion of food deserts and attempt to problematize its use as a descriptor of a community's food environment.

Walker et al. (2010) present a comprehensive literature review of empirical studies examining food deserts in the US. This review identified 31 studies comprising several methodologies including business lists, focus groups, food store assessments, food use inventories, spatial analyses, interviews, and inventories for the measurement of perceptions, questionnaires, and surveys. Several categories relevant to food deserts included access to stores, income, race and ethnicity, food store density, cost, location, store type, availability, and perceptions of the quality of available food. This review suggests that there is still debate over the health impacts of living in a food desert and also implies that the definition is still unclear which brings into question whether and to what extent food deserts exist. Moreover, the term food desert is problematic for different stake-holders given the imagery it evokes and the way it erases the structural issues that are involved in creating spatial inequities in the food system.

The conventional food system is currently largely shaped by the growth of supermarkets, which while providing convenient and affordable food resources have forced out small-scale independent grocery stores and are often located outside of urban centers. While the public health literature examining food deserts often suggests that access to supermarkets is important for healthy eating, Walker et al.'s (2010) review of this topic found some suggestions that supermarkets may have adverse effects including "tempting" consumers to overspend and over indulge in prepared food and luxury food

items. Moreover, this review also suggests that the spread of large supermarkets may drive out small grocers who adequately serve community members (Short et al., 2007). This is problematic because, as Short et al. point out, independently owned grocery stores in their study are more responsive to the needs of the community and often provide products as a service to residents even if some of these products, such as fresh produce, are economic loss leaders. Findings from the *Seattle Obesity Study* add further complexity to this discussion noting that the majority of the over 2000 participants surveyed did not shop at the nearest food stores (Hurvitz et al., 2010). However, it is not clear from this study what factors shaped food store selection decisions. Therefore, Hurvitz et al. point to the need for further research on food environments to include examinations of individual shopping behavior.

While during the past few decades there has been an overall increase in supermarket openings in the US, cities and poor neighborhoods, in particular, have experienced a net loss (Eisehauer, 2001). This trend toward fewer and larger supermarkets located in suburban communities coupled with urban disinvestment raises serious questions of how to feed vulnerable community members in inner city neighborhoods. While the public health discourse supports supermarkets with their large variety and affordable prices as a solution to poor nutrition related health outcomes, it appears there is a lack of willingness for these markets to locate in urban neighborhoods, a practice that has been referred to as "supermarket redlining" (Eisenhauer, 2001).

To counter this unwillingness on the part of corporations to build stores in the neediest neighborhoods, local governments have recently responded by developing legislation to make building supermarkets easier and more attractive to the industry. An

example of this type of policy is the Pennsylvania Fresh Food Financing Initiative, which focuses on stimulating development of supermarkets in underserved neighborhoods in urban communities in Pennsylvania (Giang et al., 2008). A campaign and research project conducted by The Food Trust utilized food policy research in order to increase the number of supermarkets in underserved urban communities in Pennsylvania. A final product of this work created an evidence-based report to be used in an advocacy campaign that culminated in the creation of the Pennsylvania Fresh Food Financing Initiative. This paper identified the growing literature that documents the lack of access to supermarkets in urban centers often due to urban flight and other complex social and economic factors (Giang et al., 2008). The authors also point out that suburbs have become more attractive sites for supermarkets due to the larger tracts of land for development, less expensive real estate, homogeneous consumer preferences, and less crime (which are all reasons for supermarket redlining practices). The authors note that supermarkets are perceived as beneficial to public health because of the variety of products they provide and lower prices. Due to these supermarket-siting practices, residents with less access must travel more or shop at convenience stores, which tend to have higher prices and less variety. The Food Trust's project utilized GIS data, mortality data as a proxy for health, and census data to generate a series of six maps that illustrate the ways in which low-income residents have less access to food and poorer health outcomes as compared to residents with better access to supermarkets, principally in higher income neighborhoods or suburban communities.

The initial success of this campaign and legislation has spurred similar work in New York City. In 2008, after the Pennsylvania legislation passed, the New York City Department of Planning conducted a study of food access in high and low income

communities across the city aiming to address issues of quality of life, health, and economic development in New York City (NYC Dept of Planning, 2008). This research identified the disparity in access to grocery stores and supermarkets across many communities and culminated in the passing of FRESH (Food Retail Expansion to Support Health) Food Stores policy that was adopted by the New York City Council in 2009 (NYC Dept of Planning, 2009). Similar to the legislation in Pennsylvania, FRESH aims to incentivize supermarkets and grocery stores to expand in low-income underserved communities. While both the New York and Pennsylvania initiatives seem to be a promising start to addressing supermarket redlining and other problems of inequities in access to healthy and affordable foods in underserved communities, it is too early to identify the effectiveness of these programs and the various impacts they have on the communities they aim to serve.

Conventional supermarkets are not the only means of providing food to communities. Poppendiek and Dwyer (2009) describe three "streams of food" that feed urban residents. These include conventional supermarkets, emergency food provisioning such as food pantries, and alternative food networks (AFNs) such as farmers markets, community supported agriculture, urban gardening, and food cooperatives. AFNs have been growing in numbers over the past decade and are currently gaining attention among scholars and food activists (Nestle, 2009). As a largely grassroots movement, AFNs challenge the conventional food system by providing community based alternatives that often strive to address environmental degradation across food production and consumption and address concerns of hunger and food equity. However, scholars have pointed out that AFNs, while incorporating social justice discourse, often do not utilize concrete strategies to address issues of food access and hunger. In turn, they are often

accused of being elitist (Allen, 2008) and constructing spaces for food that can be perceived as gendered, raced, and classed and, thus, exclude the vulnerable members of the community (Slocum, 2006).

Food practices and the food environment

Shifflett and Nyberg (1978) point out that the history of the study of food practices in the US began in the late 19th century and coincided with major advances in the field of biochemistry, which shed much light on issues of metabolism. This framework created a context with an emphasis on nutrition rather than the social and cultural interactions related to food. Thus, the stage was set for a physiological focus on the study of food and behavior, which continued to dominate food research through the first half of the twentieth century. Shifflett and Nyberg sought to address this limited perspective in their research and aimed to examine the social construction of food use patterns pointing out that all such patterns are socially constructed whether they are derived from experts or indigenous practices. Through their work they illustrate the ways in which food meanings become externalized and viewed as objective facts with various foods and food practices taking on categories of "good" or "bad" relative to the social and cultural context in which they are found.

Most relevant to the present study, Shifflett and Nyberg point out that "food is more than what one eats. What one believes about food is also relevant" (p. 48). Thus, for them, food is a part of a larger social and cultural context that appears as "objective fact" but, as they explain, is actually cultural. Given the contextual nature of meanings and beliefs related to food, it is not surprising that factors such as race and social class may also contribute to the social construction of food.

In Smith and Holm's (2010) study of social class and body management, the authors examined the differences in perceptions and consequent practices related to health and food. Examining daily practices among groups with high and low levels of education they identified differences in norms, conditions, and perceptions related to health and body weight. The authors pointed out that ignoring these differences and related socio-structural factors such as work status, social inequality, and educational level, for example, undermine interventions in health promotion for low-income individuals while reflecting the norms and practices already in place for higher-income individuals. Clearly, social conditions in general and inequality in particular are critical components to understanding food practices and must be incorporated into intervention planning and policy development.

Food practices and eating can also be viewed as behaviors that are shaped by external cues such as the amount of food presented and the unit of consumption with people often eating all of the food served to them. Rozin and Geier (2007) suggest that eating is an ecological practice and changing the food environment can help improve diet related health outcomes. They explore the role of the food environment in eating noting that rapidly changing environments in the modern world have had an adverse impact on eating practices and health. These authors further point out that the modern food environment has changed radically in relation to people's food intake needs and eating habits leading to increased eating and resulting in higher rates of overweight and obesity in developed countries such as the US. However, the authors note that culture mediates food practices and it also shapes the food environment in which food choices take place: today food "tastes" better and is easier to get, thus encouraging people to eat more of it. These changes in food products and availability in the food environment have influenced

food practices and eating behavior further contributing to increasing rates of obesity in the US. Moreover, large conventional supermarkets can exacerbate these changes. As Walker et al. (2010) suggest, larger stores offer larger varieties of foods including prepared foods and luxury foods as well as larger quantities at cheaper prices that may tempt consumers to over-consume.

Problem Statement and Research Questions

As noted earlier, the current food system produces inequities in food environments that impact low-income communities leading to adverse health outcomes. Much of this inequality in food access is rooted in food retail redlining practices and is related to urban form, race, and class. Underserved food environments form in cities in relation to the practices of corporate supermarket chains that prefer to locate on the urban fringes and suburbs while divesting from city centers while, at the same time, dominating the food retail supply system in ways that make it difficult for smaller scale independent grocers to be competitive in their limited purchasing power (Steel 2009, Walker et al. 2010). Public health and policy responses are focused on counteracting these effects by attracting supermarkets to underserved neighborhoods (NYC Department of City Planning, 2009). Yet, these policies further favor large corporate chains making it even more difficult for small independent grocers to compete as well as serve the communities in which they are located. However, there are a number of obstacles to increasing supermarkets due to scale and policy as well as corporate location preferences. At the same time, alternative food networks aim to meet the needs of the underserved but often fail by producing spaces that re-inscribe race and class and result in further inequality in community food systems (Allen 2008, Slocum 2006).

Clearly the issue of how to better serve underserved communities is complex. To begin to address this important issue, this research project seeks to better understand participants' perceptions, knowledge, values, and food practices in the context of the food environments in which they live. This project will explore how individual perceptions, knowledge, values, and food practices influence how they interact with the food environment within a food justice framework. The central research question guiding this project is: What are some ways in which food provisioning in underserved food environments are mediated by individual factors and social conditions? Given the lack of clarity around the term "food desert", this project also aims to problematize and examine this notion in terms of the experience of community members. Finally, I plan to examine the possibilities available through AFNs to better meet the needs of individuals with limited food access.

Methods and Procedures Overview

Qualitative Research Methodology

This research project incorporates a constructivist paradigm that has directed inquiry towards a social and historical perspective wherein knowledge was produced through individuals' "understanding of the world in which they live and work" (Cresswell, p8 2003). Therefore, this project utilized qualitative research methods in order to explore issues related to the food environment and the experiences of low-income people of color in relation to food access and practices, framing individuals as experts of their own experience. Denzin and Lincoln (2008) note that the term *qualitative research* holds multiple meanings, but point out that its definition includes the notion that "[qualitative

research] consists of a set of interpretive, material practices that make the world visible… qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them" (p4). Ultimately, the goal of utilizing qualitative methods in this project is aligned with Denzin and Lincoln's notion of striving for a better understanding of phenomena through critical interpretation and, as such, has utilized multiple techniques including participant observation and in-depth interviews to attempt to help make visible different means of understanding the issues at hand.

Pope and Mays (1995) contextualize the role of qualitative methods in health services research given the dominance of quantitative methods in this field. The authors situate qualitative methods as complementary and supplementary to quantitative approaches, outlining the different goals and benefits of this approach. Whereas quantitative methods seek to enumerate the "how much" of a given phenomenon or object of study, qualitative seeks to understand the "why" and "how". Qualitative methods research phenomena in natural settings as opposed to experimental contexts, in order to understand complex social phenomenon with an emphasis on meaning and experience. This most typically takes place through some form of observation and interviewing. Moreover, the authors point out that in qualitative research it is important to avoid imposing a priori categories and concepts. Rather this process involves an iterative approach going back and forth between data collection and analysis during the study period. They point out ultimately, that qualitative, while being an important precursor to the development of strong quantitative research, also can elucidate complex aspects of behavior and experience that quantitative cannot. Given the complexity of issues surrounding food and health, qualitative methods provide a sound approach to investigate the nuanced and often

emotionally and politically charged nature of relevant practices and experiences that have been explored in this study.

Moreover, qualitative research is a relevant methodology in studies of food in that it seeks to provide an understanding of social life in context. The added value of conducting interviews in settings that are part of participants' lives is that it aids in the process of understanding these participants' experiences in the context of where they live and work, in turn providing a more holistic rendering of the phenomenon being examined. Meredith Abarca (2007) expands on these practices in her ethnographic fieldwork with Mexican and Mexican-American women in public kitchens. In this work, she emphasizes the role of ethnography's ability to provide spaces for "traditionally muted people" to be heard (p. 189, 2007) as well as the role of food as an important lens in exploring social and cultural meanings. Given the participants in the current study are considered marginalized within the dominant discourses of food and health, I have found it of value to meet participants on their own terms in an effort to engage them in a dialogue about the issues surrounding their food environment and practices.

Social scientist and urban agriculturalist Annie Hauck-Lawson (1992) coined the term "food voice" through her ethnographic work in exploring the food-ways of a Polish immigrant community in Brooklyn, New York. Through her work closely observing individuals' food practices and discussing food with them directly, food itself emerged as a powerful way to understand different aspects of people's lives. Hauck-Lawson explains that "food voice emerged as a term that crystallized the dynamic, creative, symbolic, and highly individualized ways that food serves as a channel of communication" (p 6). For Hauck-Lawson food voice embodies a means of understanding the identity, self-concept and culture of individuals and communities.

In Hauck-Lawson's case study of a Polish-American woman, she was able to identify experiences related to social relations and identity noting her participant's experiences of social isolation, depression and self-image that was expressed through her discussion of food practices (Hauck-Lawson, 1998). In contrast, my project focuses on low-income people of color who face different challenges, live in different environments, and experience different cultural contexts than that of Hauck-Lawson's study. Through discussing issues of food practices and food access, participants have been able to communicate and express ideas and experiences that encompass socio-structural issues, such as race and class, that point to the ways they have been disenfranchised by their food environment and marginalized by larger policy discourses that seek to minimize the role of central issues in their lives such as the ways in which poverty shapes experiences of food practice and access. This work is situated within a framework of food justice, and therefore extends the application of *food voice* in food studies and social research beyond elucidating the various meanings food represents in social life to striving for a means of outlining how encounters with various aspects of food practice demonstrate neighborhood-level social inequities and structural violence.

By observing people's food practices and discussing food with individuals, we learn not only about their views of food and food traditions but we may also come to see more critical aspects of social and self-concepts that food practices express. As Counihan (2008) indicates, *food voice* is a way of getting at information, from emotional states to economic experiences, which may be difficult to access otherwise. In this project, food voice has been used as an approach to understand how food and food practices reflect individuals lived experiences in an underserved community and illuminate the ways in which these interactions with food may reflect experiences of social exclusion in the

broader food system as well as point to the practices that may express more positive experiences such as agency and care.

This project grows out of my participation with members of the Long Island City Food Action Board (LIC FAB) where I have attended meetings held twice monthly in Long Island City, NY from August, 2010- 2011. The LIC FAB is a grassroots community organization composed of people living in the neighborhoods of Long Island City and Astoria, in western Queens, NY. The participants involved in the LIC FAB are primarily African American and Hispanic, low-income, and range from early to older adulthood. This group meets regularly to engage in advocacy related trainings and to discuss and address issues related to poverty, hunger, and food access. I initially became involved with the LIC FAB as a community member and representative of a developing food co-op in the community. All the members of LIC FAB have had direct experience with food insecurity and are actively involved in their communities addressing related issues. Through my participation at LIC FAB meetings, I have become interested in the experiences of participant's navigation of their food environments and received their consent to conduct my research project with them.

I have conducted participant observation at regular meetings and events related to the activities of LIC FAB through the fall and winter of 2011. Participant observation has been a key component in this project in so far as it has helped me identify issues of critical importance to the group that I have incorporated into my research project as well as build relationships among insiders that will help me navigate the later stages of my study. In addition, to address the presence and possibilities associated with AFNs in this community I have conducted participant observation at the Long Island City Community Supported Agriculture (LIC CSA) during their winter and regular season pick-ups from

2011-2012. The LIC CSA is a type AFN wherein community members partner with a local farm. The partnership that is formed involves participants providing a payment to the farmer in advance of the growing season in exchange for a share of the crop throughout the season, typically lasting several months through the summer and autumn months. The LIC CSA was chosen as a site for PO because its drop-off site is currently located at a food pantry in the heart of the study micro-neighborhood. In addition, the LIC CSA aims to extend access to low-income community members through the support of NYCCAH.

Guest et al. point out that there are few specific guidelines in predetermining how many respondents are required for theoretical saturation to occur which poses a challenge to qualitative research proposals that often require some delineation of sample size (2006). However, they indicate that some factors do exist that should guide the identification of sample size in qualitative studies, including heterogeneity of the population being sampled and the project's research objectives (e.g. if a comparison of groups is part of the research design then more participants must be sampled from each group thus increasing the total sample size). Since this research project focuses on a particular community where individuals are likely to have a number of characteristics in common, such as socio-economic status as well as a shared food environment, the participants can be considered relatively homogenous. Therefore, with a more homogeneous population a smaller samples size is sufficient to reach theoretical saturation and, given that the range of sample size for typical qualitative health research projects can be as few as 6 but more frequently 12-36 participants.

In order to examine the intrapersonal and social experiences of food practices that I have identified in my research question, I have conducted individual in-depth interviews

to explore the activities and meanings related to food provisioning by informants. In-depth individual interviews have been conducted with participants of LIC FAB, members of the LIC CSA, and residents in the community identified by informants or referred by staff at local community based organizations (CBOs). All interviews were conducted between the study period of 2010-2012, and lasted from 30-90 minutes. 13 community members participated in formal semi-structured interviews, which took place in community settings including the local branch of the public library, the local food pantry as well as in participants' homes. Participants ages ranged for early 20s through individuals in their 60s. A signature of informed consent was obtained from all participants. The majority of participants were African American, with two individuals that identified as White, one as Puerto Rican and one as Indo-Guyanese. All but three participants were female. In addition, 8 staff members and volunteers from the participating CBOs were informally interviewed, including two members of NYCCAH, one staff from Hour Children Food Pantry (HCFP), one volunteer from LIC CSA, and four staff from the East River Development Alliance (ERDA).

Interview participants where recruited to contribute to this study through encounters during PO fieldwork where I extended invitations to participate in individual interviews to all community members that were present. Interviews were open-ended with questions directed at exploring issues related to how individuals think about food in their everyday lives and the ways in which their food environments impact their food provisioning activities (see Appendix A for the Interview Guide). In addition, in order to more closely examine the notion of food deserts that I am challenging in this research, I explored with participants their ideas and perceptions of the places where they source food.

Analysis

Narrative analysis was used to analyze field notes and recorded interviews. According to Chase (2003), narrative analysis incorporates two major principles that encompass the notions of narration serving as a means for people to make sense of their experience and communicate meaning, as well as being social in character in so far as telling one's store is a relational act. The interviews in this study have utilized this approach and have been analyzed using both a top-down and bottom-up coding strategies, in order to identify salient themes related to the values and practices of food and perceptions of the food environment. Thus, narratives were analyzed by employing concepts from the interview guide while simultaneously using open coding for emerging themes from participants' experiences, observations and interactions. In addition, the constant comparison approach was used to identify and construct categories around the topics of food access and the food environment (Glaser, 1965; Dye et al., 2000). This approach is utilized to help identify the most central themes found in the data across participants.

Goals and Significance

The goals of the study include increasing the theoretical understanding of food access issues in urban communities in the US. This increased knowledge will aid in the development of more effective social policies and public health interventions that seek to remedy the inequities and consequent adverse outcomes of living in underserved food environments. This study also aims to increase understanding of the factors involved in how participants living in underserved food environments perceive and negotiate food provisioning in their community. This project recognizes the marginalization of the

experience of low-income communities and seeks to provide a forum for their experiences to be both heard and to add to the discourses that describe and shape these experiences. Finally, this project intends to critique and assess the capacity for conventional and alternative food system to better serve individuals currently facing limited food access.

Organization of Dissertation

This work is organized as a series of three papers that are intended to be able to be read as stand-alone articles. The first paper: "Food Deserts?" aims to examine the recent discourse related to the concept and trope of food deserts as a means of understanding both the food environment as well as practices of food and access within the study community for this project. The second article in the series delves into the food voice of community members. The aim of this article is twofold. First, this article endeavors to listen to participants' voices, and provide a forum for their struggles around food to be heard. Secondly, this article introduces Satter's Food Hierarchy of Needs – a model adapted from Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs – and applied as a nutritional counseling and educational tool. Food voice in this case is utilized to explore the model Satter proposes and attempts to reconcile it with empirical data among low-income participants in particular. The third and final article focuses on AFNs, exploring the role the LIC CSA has in this community, and the ways in which participants see AFNs fitting into their food practices. This dissertation ends with a conclusion chapter that seeks to synthesize the findings of the current study across the three articles presented, as well as identify additional areas of future study, particularly around constructions of contemporary food practices around commensality and the ways in which food practices are represented in

current media across different social and economic strata. Finally, the social and economic influence of neoliberalism on practices and experiences in the food system are discussed.

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Manuscript #1

"Food Deserts?": A qualitative case study of the food environment and food practices in a low-income community in Queens, New York

Abstract

Food access is of great concern among low-income community members and is a focus of much public health study. Existing research around food access in urban low-income communities examines the presence of retail food as a marker for food access with the absence of supermarkets often referred to in the literature as a "food desert". This study investigates food access within the micro-neighborhood of Queensbridge in Long Island City, NY. Participant observation and in-depth interviews were conducted to gain an understanding of the characteristics and experience of this food environment. In contrast to prior research, proximity to a supermarket was not experienced as sufficiently addressing challenges of food access for this community. This study suggests that a more nuanced understanding of how low-income participants in spatially isolated urban communities access food is necessary to develop effective policies and interventions.

Background

Food is a fundamental human concern and access to food is increasingly at the forefront of public health and social policy discussions. In this paper, I examine the related issue of feeding the community by looking at the role of access and quality in the distribution of food within conventional food systems specifically in the form of supermarkets. Supermarkets in much food access research serve as a proxy for healthy and affordable food (Beaulac, Kristjansson, & Cummins 2009, Andrews, Bhatta & Ver Ploeg 2013). This issue is examined against the backdrop of the related problems of food insecurity and hunger and will involve a critical analysis of the increasingly ubiquitous notion of "food deserts". This paper draws from my dissertation research that is a

qualitative case study of the micro-neighborhood of Queensbridge located within the larger neighborhood of Long Island City in the borough of Queens, NY.

Food Environments and Access

The seminal study conducted by Moreland et al. (2002) examined food environments and their related impacts on health outcomes for people living in low-income minority communities. The authors examined the types of food stores and services available at the community level in 221 census tracts looking at supermarkets (large, corporate owned chains), grocery stores (smaller scale, independently owned stores), convenience stores, specialty food stores (e.g. produce markets), and full service and fast food restaurants. The results of this study indicated that the types of food service resources available varied by the wealth and racial makeup of the community. That study highlighted the role of race and class in the food environment and outlines the inequities that constrain the choices available to residents in underserved neighborhoods.

There is a growing awareness of inequities in food environments, often referred to as "food deserts," which is linked to poor health outcomes. Shaw (2006) examines the notion of food deserts and the extent to which they actually exist given the lack of clarity around its definition. She notes that the initial use of the term food desert began in the UK and referred to spaces that presented barriers to accessing healthy foods. She goes on to point out that this term was quickly taken up by those in policy discourse even though there is limited research to document or further clarify the nature of and existence of food deserts.

Walker et al. (2010) present a comprehensive literature review of empirical studies examining food deserts in the US. The authors of this review identify a lack of consensus in the literature regarding what constitutes a food desert but discuss the many practices

engaged in measuring food access around this concept in the literature. This review identified 31 studies comprising several methodologies including business lists, focus groups, food store assessments, food use inventories, spatial analyses, interviews, and inventories for the measurement of perceptions, questionnaires, and surveys. Several categories relevant to food deserts included access to stores, income, race and ethnicity, food store density, cost, location, store type, availability, and perceptions of the quality of available food. This review, based on the studies evaluated, suggests that there is still debate over the health impacts of living in a food desert and also implies that the definition is still unclear, given the multiple ways the concept is constructed and measured across studies, which brings into question whether and to what extent food deserts exist.

Moreover, the term food desert is problematic for different stakeholders given the imagery it evokes and the way it ignores the structural issues that are involved in creating spatial inequities in the food system. Findings from the *Seattle Obesity Study* add further complexity to this discussion noting that the majority of the over 2000 participants did not shop at the nearest supermarkets to their home (Hurvitz et al., 2010). However, it is not clear from this study what factors shaped food store selection decisions. Therefore, Hurvitz et al. point to the need for further research on food environments to include examinations of individual shopping behavior.

Much of the work done in the area of food environments and access consists of quantitative work that suggests a limited, abstracted understanding of food access in low-income food environments, and is *not able* to reflect the context and nuance of lived experience (Zenk et al 2011). Widener et al. (2011) note: "Quantitative methods have been used to derive maps that indicate which urban regions are without access to healthy

foods ...they fail to capture the dynamic nature of the urban food environment (p439)." This suggests that food environments are in fact complex and changing contexts that present challenges to methodologies that essentially take a snap shot of the spatial distribution of resources.

Policy Initiatives to Address Access

While during the past few decades there has been an overall increase in supermarket openings in the US, cities and poor neighborhoods, in particular, have experienced a net loss (Eisehauer, 2001). This trend toward fewer and larger supermarkets located in suburban communities coupled with urban disinvestment raises serious questions of how to feed vulnerable community members in inner city neighborhoods. While the public health discourse supports supermarkets with their large variety and affordable prices as a solution to poor nutrition related health outcomes, it appears there is a lack of willingness for these markets to locate in urban neighborhoods, a practice that has been referred to as "supermarket redlining" (Eisenhauer, 2001).

To counter this unwillingness on the part of corporations to build stores in the neediest neighborhoods, local governments have recently responded by developing legislation to make building supermarkets easier and more attractive to the industry. An example of this type of policy is the Pennsylvania Fresh Food Financing Initiative that focuses on stimulating development of supermarkets in underserved neighborhoods in urban Pennsylvania communities (Giang et al., 2008). A campaign and research project conducted by The Food Trust utilized food policy research in order to increase the number of supermarkets in underserved urban communities in Pennsylvania. A final product of this work created an evidence-based report to be used in an advocacy

campaign that culminated in the creation of the Pennsylvania Fresh Food Financing Initiative. This paper identified the growing literature that documents the lack of access to supermarkets in urban centers often due to urban flight and other complex social and economic factors (Giang et al., 2008). The authors also point out that suburbs have become more attractive sites for supermarkets due to the larger tracts of land for development, less expensive real estate, homogeneous consumer preferences, and less crime (which are all reasons for supermarket redlining practices). The authors note that supermarkets are perceived as beneficial to public health because of the variety of products they provide and lower prices. Due to these supermarket-siting practices, residents with less access must travel more or shop at convenience stores which tend to have higher prices and less variety. The Food Trust's project utilized GIS data, mortality data as a proxy for health, and census data to generate a series of six maps that illustrate the ways in which low-income residents have less access to food and poorer health outcomes as compared to residents with better access to supermarkets, principally in higher income neighborhoods or suburban communities.

In 2008, after the Pennsylvania legislation passed through the work of The Food Trust, the New York City Department of Planning conducted a study of food access in high and low income communities across the city aiming to address issues of quality of life, health, and economic development in New York City (NYC Dept of Planning, 2008). This research identified the disparity in access to grocery stores and supermarkets across many communities and culminated in the passing of FRESH (Food Retail Expansion to Support Health) Food Stores policy that was adopted by the New York City Council in 2009 (NYC Dept of Planning, 2009). Similar to the legislation in Pennsylvania, FRESH aims to incentivize supermarkets and grocery stores to expand in

low-income underserved communities. While both the New York and Pennsylvania initiatives seem to be a promising start to addressing supermarket redlining and other problems of inequities in access to healthy and affordable foods in underserved communities, it is too early to identify the effectiveness of these programs and the various impacts they have on the communities they aim to serve.

It is evident that the food system in general and access to food among low-income populations in particular is of great concern. Moreover, *food desert* is clearly a powerful trope and evokes imagery that seems easy to grasp, such that it has become reified and is applied frequently to discussions of food access, whether spatially related or not. Furthermore, this trope is invoked in developing interventions to these problems as has been done in New York and Pennsylvania (NYC Dept of Planning, 2009, Giang et al., 2008). The USDA has more recently operationalized the concept of food deserts as residential areas that are a mile or more from a supermarket or large grocery store (USDA Economic Research Service, accessed 2012). In this construction of a food desert, the distance of a mile, regardless of the context of the particular locale (i.e. whether it is it safe, pleasant, or practical to walk that distance) is used as the proxy for access. Furthermore, in this particular construction, supermarkets and large grocery stores are the proxy healthy food.

Pearson et al. (2005) point out that, though there is a "lack of empirical evidence for [the hypothesis that food deserts are associated with poor diets] eradication of food deserts is an integral part of government policy aimed at reducing health inequalities" (p195). As suggested above, the term *food desert* reflects a spatialized notion of food security – locating the problems of inadequate access in space and place. Moreover, there

is no doubt that there are inequities in food environments that lead to food insecurity and hunger and the multiple negative consequences related to this disparity. However, the questions I am exploring here are how well does this metaphor describe the living conditions and food experiences among resident's whose communities are categorized with this label and/or otherwise implicated by the policies constructed around this concept? How might the use of this metaphor perpetuate or undermine their experience and in particular minimize other structural factors that form these food environments?

Problem Statement

As noted above, the trope of *food deserts* is deployed in policy and health discourses to categorize certain forms of food environments. This figure of speech is certainly compelling and evokes a particular geographic imagination of under-served food environments as desolate spaces devoid of the bounty the conventional US food system seems to promise. There is undoubtedly utility in deploying this kind of language which is why it is so seemingly ubiquitous in food systems scholarship, health, and policy literatures as well as increasingly so in the popular media. At the same time, I am troubled by the use of the term food desert and the many varied and often conflicting applications of this term in different contexts ranging from categorical designations of communities judged to have limited to no "healthy" food options and up to and including its use in foodie contexts such as "Chinese food desert" – denoting locales where *good* Chinese food is not to be found (na, 2011). In this article, I will discuss some emerging themes of this research project focusing on the experience of food access in the micro-neighborhood of Queensbridge with an emphasis on the problematic nature of the food desert trope and the possible implications of its use.

This project is a qualitative research study grounded in a relationship with food advocacy in the community of Long Island City (LIC), located in western Queens, New York City. I live in the surrounding community and have been working with my community around food systems issues over the last seven years, particularly focusing on alternative food networks (AFNs) including community supported agriculture (CSA) and food cooperatives, which is how I came to be involved in working with residents in and around the micro-neighborhood of Queensbridge in LIC. As an outgrowth of this advocacy work, a number of critical issues regarding participation or, to be more precise, – the lack thereof – emerged as concern. Specifically, there was an absence of community members from outside the dominant group, made up largely of educated, white, middle-class women. This project aims to increase understanding of issues related to food access focusing on the food environment in a low-income community in Queens, NY that is underserved by the conventional food system. This paper addresses this issue by engaging in the ongoing public health and policy discussion that centers on the notion of food deserts as a way of conceptualizing food access. In addition, the provisioning of food in this community, with its challenges of food access, is considered in terms of food insecurity and hunger as well as poverty. This paper concludes with a consideration of current policy and suggestions for future directions in policy that seek to more closely address the structural issues that are implicated in the poverty that undergirds the food access experiences of community members in this study.

Methods and Procedures

This project examines the issues of food access and practices and grows out of my participation with members of the Long Island City Food Action Board (LIC FAB) held

twice monthly in Long Island City, NY. The LIC FAB is a grassroots community organization composed of people living in the neighborhoods of Long Island City and Astoria, in western Queens, NY. The participants involved in the LIC FAB are primarily African American and Hispanic, low-income, and range from early to older adulthood. This group met regularly to engage in advocacy related trainings and to discuss and address issues related to poverty, hunger, and food access. I initially became involved with the LIC FAB as a community member and representative of a developing food co-op in the community. All the members of LIC FAB have had direct experience with food insecurity and are actively involved in their communities addressing related issues.

I conducted participant observation at regular meetings and events related to the activities of the LIC FAB through the winter of 2011. In addition, to address the presence and possibilities associated with AFNs in this community, I conducted participant observation at the Long Island City Community Supported Agriculture (LIC CSA) during their winter and regular season pick-ups from 2011-2012. The LIC CSA is a type alternative food scheme wherein community members partner with a local farm. The partnership that is formed involves participants providing a payment to the farmer in advance of the growing season in exchange for a share of the crop throughout the season, typically lasting several months through the summer and autumn months. The LIC CSA was chosen as a site for participant observation (PO) because its drop-off site is currently located at a food pantry in the heart of the study micro-neighborhood. In addition, the LIC CSA aims to extend access to low-income community members through the support of NYCCAH.

In order to examine the intrapersonal and social experiences of food practices that I have identified in my research question, I have conducted individual in-depth interviews

to explore the activities and meanings related to food provisioning by informants. In-depth individual interviews have been conducted with participants of the LIC FAB, members of the LIC CSA, and residents in the community identified by informants or referred by staff at local community based organizations (CBOs). All interviews were conducted during the study period of 2010-2012 and lasted from 30-90 minutes. 13 community members participated in formal semi-structured interviews that took place in community settings including the local branch of the public library, the local food pantry as well as in participants' homes. Participants' ages ranged from early 20s through late 60s. A signature of informed consent was obtained from all participants. The majority of participants were African American, with two individuals who identified as White, one as Puerto Rican, and one as Indo-Guyanese. All but three participants were female. In addition, 8 staff members and volunteers from the participating CBOs were informally interviewed, including two members of NYCCAH, one staff from Hour Children Food Pantry (HCFP), one volunteer from LIC CSA, and four staff from the East River Development Alliance (ERDA).

Interviews were open-ended with questions directed at exploring issues related to how individuals think about food in their everyday lives and the ways in which their food environments impact their food provisioning activities. Questions included in the interview guide (see appendix for full interview guide) addressed topics around the food environment in this micro-neighborhood and included questions related to food values and practices as well as community perceptions of food access. Examples of questions asked include:

- What are the food choices like your neighborhood?
- Do you have any problems getting food for you and your household?
- Do you know anyone suffering from hunger?

- Are you familiar with the term food deserts? What does it mean to you?

The interview narratives and field notes were analyzed by employing concepts from the interview guide while simultaneously using open coding for emerging themes from participants' experiences, observations, and interactions. In addition, the constant comparison approach was used to identify and construct categories around the topics of food access and the food environment (Glaser, 1965; Dye et al., 2000). This approach is utilized to help identify the most central themes found in the data across participants.

Setting

The Queensbridge Houses is the largest public housing development in North America and was built in 1939. Queensbridge Houses, often referred to simply as "Queensbridge", is located in the borough of Queens, in New York City, within the neighborhood of Long Island city (LIC). It houses nearly 7000 people and, because of its scale and density, Queensbridge is sometimes denoted as a city within a city. The community of Queensbridge is located in Western Queens in New York City (see figure 1). This micro-neighborhood is located along the East River to the west of the housing development and is bordered to the south by Queens Boulevard – a 12 lane roadway with the entrance of the 59th Street Bridge at its western edge. To the east of this community is 21st Street, which is an industrial and commercial corridor mainly populated with warehouses, car washes, and auto-parts stores. To the north of Queensbridge is mixed industrial space including the large Ravenswood Power Plant.

Fig. 1 – Satellite image of Queensbridge Houses, produced from Google Maps.

The over 3000 units of Queensbridge are effectively spatially segregated, which influences the way community members experience this space. It is isolated from nearby residential and mixed-use areas in the adjacent neighborhoods through the physical barriers created by the boundaries described above. Queensbridge as a micro-neighborhood is unique in that it is large scale but not integrated into the larger community like its neighboring housing developments and thus is cut-off from amenities that more mixed-use and residential areas enjoy including a variety of retail food resources. This isolating spatial form also has obvious implications related to race and class with an extreme concentration of poverty (News One Staff, 2011) evidenced by systematic disinvestment in the community such as the lack of maintenance on the building and grounds of Queensbridge as well as in the surrounding environment, limited public transit options and service, as well as other municipal resources.

Findings

Spatial Approaches to Assessing Food Access in Queensbridge

Figure 2 below presents a map that is produced from the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) Food Desert Locator (USDA ERS, accessed on 2/1/2012).

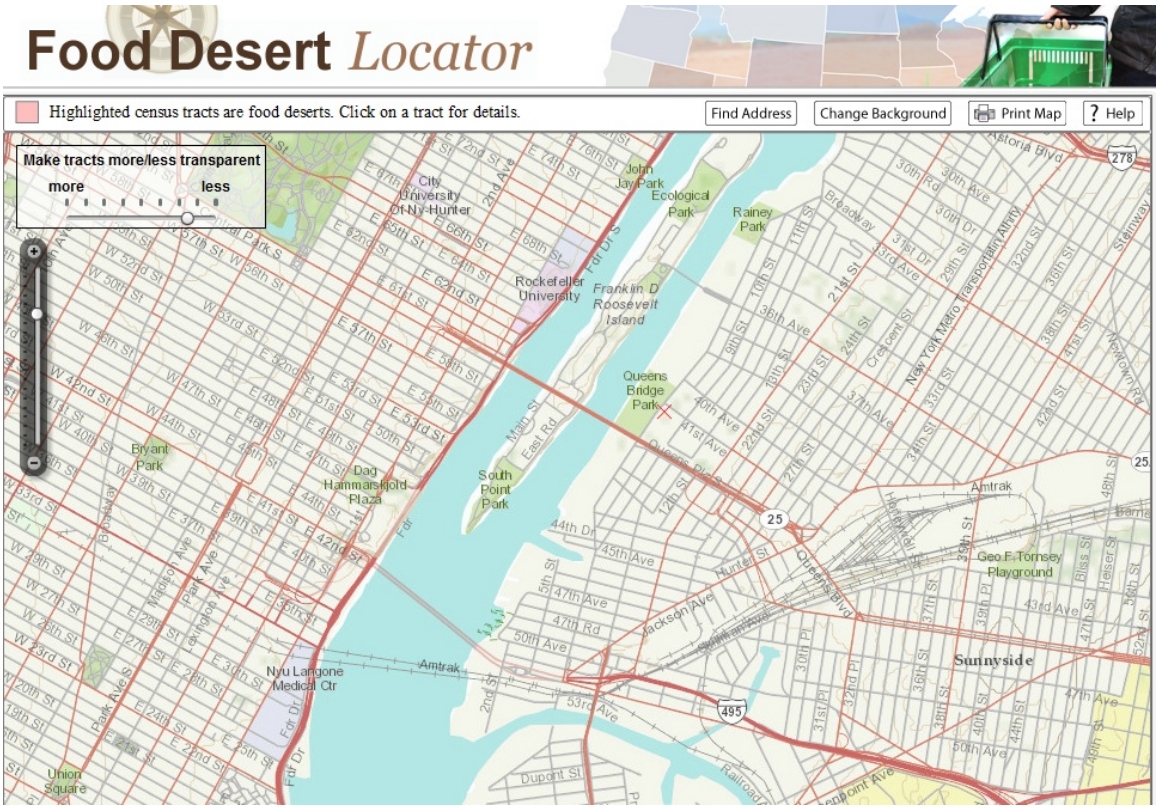

Fig. 2 USDA Food Desert Locator Map –The Queensbridge area is designated by the "red x"

This GIS tool is frequently cited in the media as a means of identifying food deserts and, thus, communities in need of resources and interventions to address food access. Food deserts in the maps produced through this program would be designated by pink highlighted areas which, in this case, are absent and, thus, in reviewing the map in figure 2, we observe that the Queensbridge area is not identified as a food desert according to

the USDA. The map in figure 3 was produced for this study by the New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene (NYC DOHMH) GIS Center of Excellence and identifies various food retail resources (indicated by colored dots) across LIC the boundary of which is outlined in red in this map. The NYC DOHMH identifies this area as well resourced in terms of food retail overall suggesting that residents in this community have good access to healthy and appropriate foods. In reviewing this map, one can observe that most food retail is concentrated in the mixed-use communities throughout the neighborhood. At the same time, Queensbridge is not accurately rendered in this map as there are food retail locations within the Queensbridge Housing Development, namely a chain supermarket as well as a deli that provides some grocery items. However, in this map, Queensbridge is not accurately represented as the supermarket and deli that are located on the property are not present on this map.

Fig. 3 – LIC Community Food Resources; Courtesy of the New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene, GIS Center of Excellence

The departmental or city officials and policy makers viewing this map determine that the location of LIC, as a whole, is a higher income/low need neighborhood in terms of food resources. Using this map (Fig.3), the lack of visibility of Queensbridge has important implications for interventions that are being made available by the city, state

and federal programs to communities struggling with issues of access. Specifically, funding made available to areas identified as underserved using the current criteria may not be available to address the forms of food access challenges faced by residents in this micro-neighborhood. In addition, the condition of utilizing maps such as the ones above further suggests the need to understand the experience of community members' food environment first hand as they essentially disappear in this map.

The Food Environment and Access in Queensbridge

Through my time conducting participant observation in and around the micro-neighborhood of Queensbridge, I have had the opportunity to observe the food resources available and engage community members to discuss experiences of the food system here. Overall, participants in this study were dissatisfied with the food environment in and around Queensbridge that is characterized by one chain supermarket, a number of bodegas and 24-hour delis, and fast-food establishments. As one participant, an African American male in his late 30s states:

> "…to me [the food choices] are not really good, but no one is taking the time to do anything about it."

He, like many other residents I spoke with is concerned with food options located nearby which are largely convenience oriented low-cost foods. He goes on to point out:

> "Everything is fast food over here; there is nothing healthy... there aren't any good stores around here."

This single father is passionately concerned about the overall poor quality of the food environment he lives in. Another resident of Queensbridge, who is active in the community, shares her observations of the issue of food access in this micro-neighborhood:

> "I think a lot of the community members have the same issues as me. I went to a tenants association meeting recently… where a social services agency from NYCHA was there who asked the tenants what they need and many people said fresh veggies!"

This mother of four suggests that concern for the lack of choices is a pervasive problem and concern to many members of the community with a particular emphasis on the lack of fresh high quality produce available within the micro-neighborhood. Fresh vegetables are not the only concern in this community. Many residents expressed concern over access to meat products that are staple parts of their diets. A long-time resident, an African American woman in her early 50s, expands on this issue pointing out:

> "Certain items I can't get in my neighborhood. If I like a certain meat it's very difficult to get…they have different grades of meat and it is very difficult to get good quality meat in this area."

She is concerned, like many other community members I have spoken with, over the lack of meat products stocked in stores in this area.

The quality of food along with the availability of products such as vegetables in this community is also a major concern. The same participant discussing concerns over access to meat, adds:

> "Quality of food hasn't changed very much… the perishable food isn't cared for very much"

So while some retailers in the area may offer vegetables in stock, there is a major concern over the quality of this produce and that, at least in this participant's case, this has been an ongoing condition she has observed over the years. Another participant, a single mother in her early 40s expands on this issue:

> "Some of the grocery stores I notice that as soon as I get the food it goes bad… I don't know how fresh it is… you get it and two days later there's mold on it or something… and its expensive!"

So while community members do continue to try and source these products many residents complain that the produce is clearly not fresh and are concerned over wasting their limited incomes on foods that seem to quickly become inedible.

Yet, as described above, this community does not technically meet the definition of a food desert as it does have a supermarket (Associated) located within the community. The Associated Supermarket is a major chain grocery in New York City and has a retail store within Queensbridge Houses. Yet, in asking participants about food access, many concerns surface even in the face of this food "resource". A long-time resident in her early 60s discusses issues of access in terms of concern over distance explaining:

> "It's the distance really…I say distance because in order to find a bargain you can't buy where you live...you have to go somewhere else because there is only one supermarket (Associated) in the area and the [price] is so high. So everybody has to go somewhere far out to get a decent bargain..."

In this instance, there is awareness that there is a supermarket located nearby but it does not present as a viable option. In this participant's case, she is especially concerned about pricing which many participants, community member's and CBO staff members have noted seem to be exorbitantly high.

Oasis in a Food Desert or Supermarket Monopoly?

A staff member from ERDA, who works directly with community members, states almost ominously:

> "Associated is on everyone's mind…"

Food is clearly of great concern in this micro-neighborhood where woven throughout the side streets and interior of the community is a network of calorie-dense convenience foods. In spending time walking through this community and speaking with community members it is clear how limited the choices appear and the dearth of fresh produce is obvious right away. However, what is surprising given the focus of supermarkets as solutions to food access in current health literature, is that this community with close geographic proximity to a supermarket still faces great struggles with food access. Reflecting the comment above, pricing is a great concern in the experience of this supermarket. A young adult African American male, who has lived with his mother in Queensbridge for the last nine years, echoes this charge:

> "[My mother] doesn't go [to Associated] because they charge too much for too little."

Price and value are essential for these participants all of who consider themselves low-income and many of whom are greatly dependent on food safety-net benefits such as food stamps (now known as SNAP). Price is of such great concern around this supermarket that participants vehemently refuse to shop there. The single father, mentioned above, states:

> "Its so expensive and I just don't like it…its not where I would normally shop. It's just too expensive. I think because it's the only supermarket over there and there is no competition that they can be expensive."

Community members have a sense that this supermarket is aware of the monopoly it has in this community and perceives their pricing practices as reflecting the stranglehold they have in this community. Another participant reiterates this point expressing great frustration:

> "[Associated] knows they are the only supermarket there so they can raise their prices way up… and senior citizens and others who can't travel just have to buy there."

Community members express a feeling of victimization by Associated Supermarket and their pricing practices given their place as the only supermarket in the community. Further, many community members point out that this public housing development is home to many seniors as well as people with disabilities that have little option other than to shop there.

To add insult to injury, the condition of the store itself is also a concern along with the culture of the management and staff at this supermarket. The mother of four states passionately:

> "They need to renovate [Associated]…they just figure that they're going to make their money…they don't care."

The physical conditions of the store are seen as poor by most people I have spoken with for this study that I confirmed over several visits to this location during the study period. Isles in the store are cramped and feel disorganized with the store as a whole feeling unwelcoming and uncared for. This same participant explains how this goes on:

> "He knows that the community is going to buy no matter what…"

Again, reflecting the sense of monopoly this supermarket has in the community that situates the store and its management as having a position of power such that they do not feel the need to be responsive to the concerns of the community members. This lack of care extends from the physical space of the store to include its products as suggested above. One young participant who grew up in the community discusses the products at the store:

> "At Associated, the fish and meat look horrible…so you have to go somewhere else."

She, like many other community members are extremely concerned over the lack of care of the products sold at Associated. Staff members at ERDA who report frequently hearing of the poor conditions of the store and its products over the years reiterated this complaint.

Navigating this Food Environment…Its better to leave.

The Associated store in this community is consistently disappointing to participants in this study in seemingly all ways from the poor physical environment of the store to the high prices for low quality food and limited food choices. One participant explained investigating matters of quality by inquiring with the management reporting:

> "When I've asked at the supermarket they say the healthy food is too expensive and the community won't buy it…"

This report of the managements' reaction to concerns over the store is common and reflects a lack of motivation for the store to make any meaningful change. This is also consistent with reports from ERDA that has had staff work with residents to lodge formal complaints to the store management apparently to no avail.

Given this supermarket's lack of responsiveness to the community needs, those who can choose go elsewhere. One of the only participants with access to a private car exclaims:

> "I absolutely do not shop there, not even for canned goods. There is absolutely no access to fresh vegetables in the area so I travel outside of our local area."

This participant is thoroughly frustrated by the conditions at the Associated and exercises her option to go elsewhere. However, for most participants, transportation is not so easy. The majority of participants in this study does not have access to cars and are faced with navigating transit issues in order to escape this supermarket's problems. As one participant simply states:

> "I walk, but I don't care…they're cheaper than the food in the neighborhood… the Associated."

Even though the micro-neighborhood of Queensbridge is surrounded by interstitial spaces that are reportedly unpleasant to walk, this participant, like others, would still rather opt for a 15- or 20-minute walk to a supermarket in an adjacent community rather than be subject to the abuses of Associated.

Leaving the neighborhood is not necessarily as common a practice in this community as it might be for other New Yorkers since many of the participants in this study, like their fellow community members, are un- or under-employed. Thus, while many people may travel through multiple neighborhoods on a regular basis, this is less common in this community. Yet, for food, travel is expected. As one community member expresses succinctly:

> "When a community has less choices for food…they have to travel outside of their own community to have that commodity."

Pricing is bound with choice in relation to food for this community. The search for affordable foods is a major factor that shapes provisioning practice. As another participant puts it:

> "The thing is the cost… I search around for the cost factor."

Here, cost is the driving factor in making food-shopping decisions. Another participant responds similarly:

> "I go to wherever the best prices are for that month…"

Yet, concern for health is still a factor and also steers residents outside of the neighborhood in search of better food options. One participant explains:

> "I have to go out of the neighborhood to [get healthy foods] and I don't think it's good that the kids don't have a choice."

Here, this single father expresses the need to travel outside of the community for healthy options. Ultimately, to satisfy both budget and health, community members choose to leave the neighborhood rather than shop at the supermarket located within the heart of the community. However, that is not a choice everyone can easily make as one participant clearly points out:

> "When you are older than you can't travel like you use to…"

Again, this statement highlights the challenging nature of sourcing food in and around this micro-neighborhood. Traveling outside the community for food shopping is an onerous task for all of the participants exploring this issue but, as suggested above, many

community members, such as older adults, would find it prohibitive to travel outside of the community. Thus, for those who have barriers to traveling for food shopping whether related to time, finances, or physical ability are particularly vulnerable to the limited options in this micro-neighborhood and subject to the practices of the sole supermarket in the community.

Not Distance but Cost

In discussing navigating this food environment and accessing food in this community, one of the most commonly repeated themes is that of cost. Many of the concerns participants discussed above related to the food environment in general, and to the experience of the Associated Supermarket in particular are bound up with a pervasive concern around price and cost, which is not unexpected for a low-income community. As one participant states plainly:

"Mainly people are more worried about the cost of food."

In directly addressing issues of food access in general, and the notion of food deserts in particular, participants such as this one focus on cost over location. A young man participating in this study states more vividly:

"The more healthy the more expensive; the more junky, the less you have to pay."

For this impoverished community, healthful foods are associated with a high cost and their food environment, in turn, is stocked with more affordable, albeit, "junky" options. This same participant goes on to explain, having never heard the term food deserts before:

> "There are other problems bigger than food… financial problems."

Food in this instance is eclipsed by poverty. The larger policy discourses that situate what types of food resources are located where are of less concern than the overall difficult financial situation the vast majority of this study's participants find themselves in.

This food environment is neither a food desert in the technical sense nor is it food secure by any means. In an effort to engage participants in terms of current food access policy, concern continual shifts to cost over locale. One participant who is particularly interested in food describes the broader community:

> "I don't see a concern [for food] in the community, but the concern is around the prices being very high."

Here, she like many seem to be willing to live with many inconveniences, but in the face of poverty, the cost of food seems to outweigh all other concerns. Community members in this study live in a micro-neighborhood characterized by a high concentration of poverty. The fact of this poverty appears inescapable and is woven into the fabric of the food environment in this micro-neighborhood.

The participants I have spoken with have a high tolerance for many oppressive conditions in their environment and have shown resilience in navigating this food system.

Conclusion:

The Problem with Metaphors

This research project uncovers community members' experiences of their food environment in ways that challenge the use of the metaphor of food deserts and instead

suggests that resources be dedicated to better understand these experiences so more effective policy and interventions can be developed. As food desert discourses gain greater prominence in the literature, the term becomes explicitly integrated into policy. For example, a recent piece of legislation passed by the General Assembly of North Carolina (Session 2013), explicitly uses this trope giving the short title to this bill as "Food Desert Zones" and utilizing the USDA/ERS designation of food desert to identify zones for eligibility for state support to fund measures to expand food access in these areas. In the case of neighborhoods like Queensbridge - the community loses out on attention to its food access needs that maps like these produce by policy makers and public health professionals who rely on this kind of data.

At the same time, however, the food desert metaphor is beginning to be critiqued by food and hunger activists such as LaDonna Redmond who "despises" this term (2009) and seeks, instead, to shift the discourse to a food-justice model where as she states: "To change our food system, we need to change the way we talk about it." One way of shifting this discourse and 'changing the way we talk about [food systems]', as suggested by the experience of participants in this project, is to begin to talk about the politics of food insecurity, hunger and poverty in shaping food practices and experiences and is exacerbated by neoliberal policy environments. Many participants are dependent on food safety net programs and emergency food systems. Many of the CBOs serving this community work on issues of economic development and employment to attempt to address issues of poverty in residents' lives and the local food pantries see long queues at the beginning of each distribution. As one participant and pantry user mentions: *"There's more people than there is food…"* Or at least there is the experience of scarcity and deprivation at a large scale in the Queensbridge/LIC community that the trope of food

deserts sheds little if any light on and, perhaps, instead diverts attention away from these less palatable and politically more complex issues.

Finally, while there is clearly an important spatial dimension to understanding the experience of food practice at the neighborhood level findings from this study suggest the importance of examining socio-cultural issues of food provisioning. I am not suggesting that the work policy makers utilizing the food desert metaphor be abandoned altogether, but at the same time the participants in this study illustrate the ways in which a purely spatial understanding of the food environment, with the supermarket serving as a proxy for food access, does not provide sufficient insight into the challenges of provisioning for these residents. The community members in this study struggle with food access in spite of having a supermarket centrally located within their community. Therefore, in order to develop more effective policies and interventions to address the health related outcomes associated with food insecurity and hunger, these socio-cultural conditions that shape food practices in nuanced ways should be examined further. While spatial factors should continue to be investigated and addressed measures must be taken to strengthen food safety net programs at the state and federal level that have been eroded over the years by neoliberal policies that look to the market to address complex social and enconomic issues, in order to increase food access among low-income communities such as the residents in Queensbridge.

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Manuscript #2

"Why can't I get that off a shelf in my neighborhood?": Food Voice in a Low-income Community in NYC

Abstract

Food Voice examines the lived experience of participants through the lens of food in everyday life. This study explores the experiences of residents living in and around the largest public housing development in North America – the Queensbridge Houses in Long Island City, NY. Through in-depth interviews and participant observation, key informants discuss their experiences with food and their local food environment. Their narratives reveal the numerous challenges residents face as well as tactics they engage in navigating a micro-neighborhood food system that is largely geographically isolated from the rest of the city and faces structural problems including disenfranchisement and neglect. Participants in this project reveal salient aspects of the experience of living in such a community through the ways in which they discuss their practices of procuring and consuming foods. In discussing food practices, participants highlight struggles with socio-cultural factors including race and class that are inscribed into their food environments and are communicated through their food voices. This paper also aims to understand these food experiences in terms of a model of food motivation called the Hierarchy of Food Needs.

Introduction

Food Environment and Food Practice

Eating and related food practices can be viewed as behaviors that are shaped by external cues such as the amount of food presented and the unit of consumption with people often eating all of the food served to them. Rozin and Geier (2007) suggest that eating is an ecological practice and changing the food environment can help improve diet related health outcomes. They explore the role of the food environment in eating noting that rapidly changing environments in the modern world have had an adverse impact on

eating practices and health. These authors further point out that the modern food environment has changed radically in relation to people's food intake needs and eating habits leading to increased eating and resulting in higher rates of overweight and obesity in developed countries such as the US. However, the authors note that culture mediates food practices and it also shapes the food environment in which food choices take place: today, food "tastes" better and is easier to get thus encouraging people to eat more of it. Moreover, large conventional supermarkets can exacerbate this shift toward a more indulgence oriented food experience by providing a site to access these more convenient and tastier foods. As Walker et al. (2010) suggest, larger stores offer larger varieties of foods including prepared foods and luxury foods as well as larger quantities at cheaper prices that may tempt consumers to over-consume. The importance of the context of the food environment sets the stage for this analysis of food voice in a low-income community in Queens, NY, given the ways in which it influences actual behavior and experience.

A seminal study conducted by Moreland et al. (2002) examined food environments and their related impacts on health outcomes for people living in low-income minority communities. Moreland and colleagues examined the types of food stores and services available at the community level in 221 census tracts. This work involved looking at supermarkets (large, corporate owned chains), grocery stores (smaller scale, independently owned stores), convenience stores, specialty food stores (e.g. produce markets), and full service and fast food restaurants. Study results indicated that the types of food service resources available varied by the wealth and racial makeup of the community. Moreland et al.'s study highlighted the role of race and class in the food environment and outlined the inequities that constrain the choices available to residents in

underserved neighborhoods. Thus, while the food environment has implications for the well being of all, there are particular concerns for vulnerable community members such as residents of low-income neighborhoods. As in Moreland's study, this project engaged low-income community members that have been vocal about the inequality and barriers to accessing food in their geographically insular community, similarly characterized by an overall limited variety of food retail and dominated by take-away food restaurants and small corner stores and 24-hour delis.

Access to high quality food is obviously vital to maintaining health and well-being as well as an important component of quality of life. Yet, as noted above, access to adequate, appropriate, and healthy foods is constrained in many urban communities in the United States, including the micro-neighborhood of Queensbridge in New York City, and the focus of the current study. Problems of food access, also referred to as food insecurity, are linked to numerous adverse health outcomes including increased rates of morbidity and mortality due to diet related diseases (Adams et al. 2003, Kwate 2008, Raja et al. 2010). In addition, these inequities highlight social injustices such as spatial segregation, systematic community disinvestment, and neighborhood deprivation within the larger food system dominated by the conventional retail infrastructure that supplies food to the general public (Brown et al., 2008). It is recognition of these environmental factors constraining food choice that inform the analysis of the food experiences of community members in this paper.

Food justice, as a concept, examines food security in "the contexts of institutional racism... and racialized geographies" (Alkon & Norgaard 2009, p 289). Alkon and Norgaard point out the ways in which institutional racism creates spaces that constrain access to healthy and high quality food in the conventional food system for low-income

people of color. As a result, residents of these underserved neighborhoods consume nutrient poor and energy dense foods such as processed and fast foods. Thus, the work of food justice activists and scholars seeks to not only address issues of access at the neighborhood level but also has a more comprehensive political vision that incorporates systemic change addressing structural issues related to race and class at multiple scales. In this study, access to food intersects with race and class in ways that are revealed through an investigation of the participants' experience of their food environments.

Study Area – The Queensbridge Micro-Neighborhood

For this project, the study area was selected for its high concentration of low-income residents. The Queensbridge Houses were opened in 1939 and is located within the neighborhood of Long Island City (LIC), on the western-most edge of the borough of Queens, NY. It is the largest public housing development in North America at nearly 4,000 units. The population estimates of this community vary greatly with more official reports ranging anywhere from 7,000 to 9,000 residents (News One Staff, 2011) to informal accounts ranging upwards of 20,000 individuals inhabiting these buildings.

The Queensbridge community is geographically interesting in many ways, including its social and physical characteristics related to its locale. The shear scale of this housing development and the upward estimates of its population suggest a high population density characterized by a significant concentration in poverty, with Queensbridge being particularly "infamous" for its "poverty-stricken" conditions (News One Staff, 2011). This micro-neighborhood is spatially segregated from the larger community by being bound to the west by the East River, the south by Queens Boulevard

and the 59th Street Bridge, to the east by 21st Street (which is an industrial corridor), and to the north by the Ravenswood Power Plant. The spatial form of this micro-neighborhood creates an environment that feels cut-off from the surrounding area and promotes a spatial practice where community members tend to remain within this small geographic locale with few outsiders traveling through it. Given the geographic isolation of this micro-neighborhood, the unique food environment that is produced there is of interest due to the high impact that local food retailers have on shaping the food choices available to this community. In addition, the way residents' access food is shaped by the means by which they navigate their food environments as more diverse food resources located just outside the neighborhood cannot be accessed conveniently.

Food Voice

Julier (2004) points out "food operates as a discursive field through which people construct boundaries of similarities and difference" (p 14). Furthermore, food is a means of understanding everyday life and aspects of lived experiences that may be challenging to interrogate and articulate directly. Social scientist and urban agriculturalist Annie Hauck-Lawson (1992) coined the term "food voice" through her ethnographic work in exploring the food-ways of a Polish immigrant community in Brooklyn, New York. Through her work closely observing individuals' food practices and discussing food with them directly, food itself emerged as a powerful way to understand different aspects of people's lives. Hauck-Lawson explains that "food voice" emerged as a term that crystallized the dynamic, creative, symbolic, and highly individualized ways that food serves as a channel of communication" (p 6). For Hauck-Lawson, food voice embodies a

means of understanding the identity, self-concept, and culture of individuals and communities.

In Hauck-Lawson's case study of a Polish-American woman, she was able to identify experiences related to social relations and identity noting her participant's experiences of social isolation, depression, and self-image were expressed through her discussion of food practices (Hauck-Lawson, 1998). Building on this work, Deutsch (2004), in his ethnographic study with participants in an urban firehouse, explains that "[m]any times the food voice expresses boldly what the spoken voice struggles to articulate" (p 28). In his project, food voice is entangled with the spoken voice in ways that illustrate and navigate relationships of care in a hyper-masculine context of the fire house environment.

My project focused on community members who face the challenge of food access, live in an underserved food environment, and experience the socio-cultural context of a micro-neighborhood characterized by concentrated poverty. By discussing issues of food practices and food access, participants communicate ideas and experiences that encompass socio-structural issues such as race and class. Their stories point to the ways they have been disenfranchised by those who shape their food environment and marginalized by larger policy discourses that seek to minimize the role of central issues in their lives such as the ways in which poverty shapes experiences of food practice and access. This work is situated within a framework of food justice and therefore extends the application of *food voice* in food studies and social research. This current article aims to address issues of food justice by elucidating the various meanings food represents in social life, to strive for a means of outlining how encounters with various aspects of food practice demonstrate neighborhood-level social inequities that effectively "silence" community members food voices.

Hierarchy of Food Needs

Dietician Ellyn Satter (2007) developed a model of eating and nutrition practice that shifts attention away from a strict interpretation of Dietary Guidelines and towards what she describes as "emphasizing structured opportunities to eat…encouraging people to eat preferred foods in satisfying amounts" (p S187). To address concerns dietetic professionals full may have about strict adherence to Dietary Guidelines, Satter proposed a conceptual model of eating to aid in understanding the ways in which people approach food choice under various life conditions. This model, which she entitles the "Hierarchy of Food Needs", borrows directly from Abraham Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, a theory of personality that seeks to describe personal experience in the tradition of humanistic psychology (Maslow 1943). In Maslow's theory, he sets up a hierarchic set of needs that he presents as basic to all humans and the most basic, or lowest level of need must be satisfied to some extent before the individual can go on to address higher order needs beginning with physiological needs on up.

In an attempt to explain human motivations around food, Satter borrows directly from Maslow. She even arranges a set of food needs hierarchically in a pyramid as Maslow's model is often represented (see Fig.1). The set of needs Satter lays out represents a relationship to food that begins with what is essential for survival – "enough food" – up to practices of food that can only be engaged when all lower-order needs

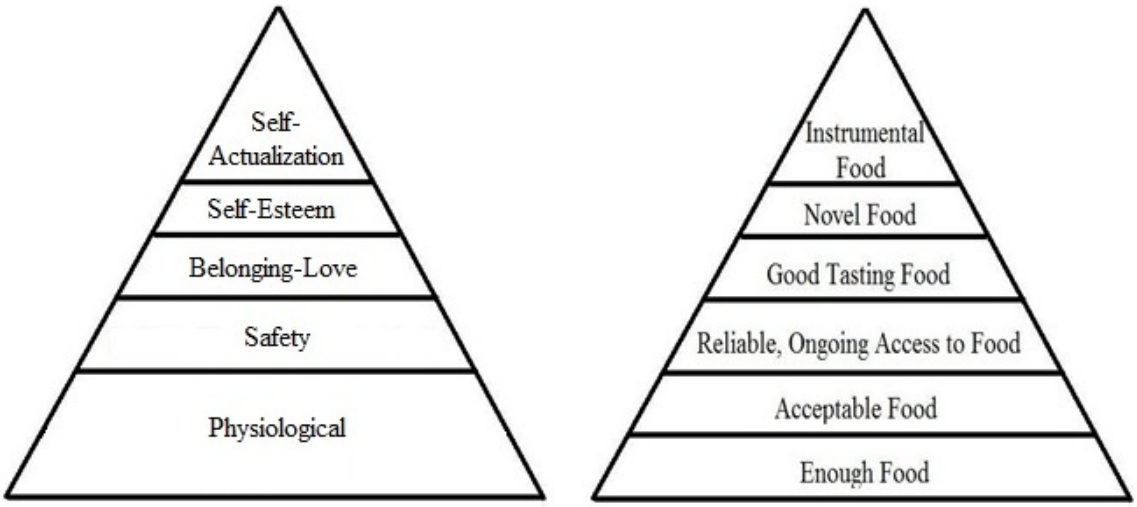

Figure 1: Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (left), and Satter's Hierarchy of Food Needs (right).

have been met. The model culminates with a notion she refers to as "Instrumental Food" that represents engaging with food in order to satisfy related aspects of personal fulfillment such as a "desired physical, cognitive, or spiritual outcome" (p S188). Satter proposes this model as a means of aiding in food management. Yet, as it stands, the model remains under-theorized and is currently not grounded in empirical data. While in essence Satter's model is descriptive of orientations and contexts for food practices, it is unclear how well it reflects lived experience. At the same time, there has been growing attention in recent months and years across the blogosphere, particularly on race-conscious, women's interest and health focused blogs (see for example: http://blackgirlsguidetoweightloss.com/food-101/hierarchy-of-food-needs-how-do-you-get-good-food-when-theres-no-food/; http://www.fatnutritionist.com/index.php/if-only-poor-people-understood-nutrition/; and http://jezebel.com/5612211/the-hierarchy-of-

food-needs). Thus, to build on the discussions taking place in this popular context, an additional aim of this paper is to examine how participants' experiences reflect or diverge from this model. The focus here is on the foundational levels of enough food and acceptable food.

Methods and Study Population

This research project utilized qualitative research methods for this case study in order to explore issues related to the food environment and the experiences of low-income people of color in relation to food access and practices. Denzin and Lincoln (2008) note that the term *qualitative research* holds multiple meanings but point out that its definition includes the notion that "[qualitative research] consists of a set of interpretive, material practices that make the world visible… qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them" (p4).

Moreover, qualitative research is an applicable methodology in studies of food in that it seeks to provide an understanding of social life in context. The added value of conducting interviews in settings that are part of participants' lives is that it aids in the process of understanding these participants' experiences in the context of where they live and work. This in turn provides a more holistic rendering of the phenomenon being examined. Meredith Abarca (2007) expands on these practices in her ethnographic fieldwork with Mexican and Mexican-American women in public kitchens. In this work, she emphasizes the role of ethnography's ability to provide spaces in which "traditionally muted people" to be heard (p. 189, 2007). The role of food also figures as an important lens in exploring social and cultural meanings. Given that the residents in

this community are considered marginalized within the dominant discourses of food and health, I have found that this method of meeting participants on their own terms to be of value for discussing their food environment and practices.

This study included participant observation (PO) with the Long Island City Food Action Board (LIC FAB), the Hour Children Food Pantry (HCFP), and the Long Island City Community Supported Agriculture (LIC CSA) from August, 2010 through October, 2012. The LIC FAB was a community based advocacy group organized with the support of the New York City Coalition Against Hunger (NYCCAH) and brought together low-income residents of LIC drawing mainly residents from Queensbridge Houses and Ravenswood Houses. HCFP is one of few "client-choice[1]" emergency food pantries in New York City and is located in the heart of this section of LIC geographically located between and within walking distance of these two housing developments. While clients from all over the city are able to access this pantry, the bulk of its clients are drawn from this micro-neighborhood situated between these two major public housing developments. In addition, PO was conducted at the LIC CSA as it aims to increase food access to this micro-neighborhood by: 1. Locating the weekly produce pick up at HCFP and 2. Providing access to CSA produce through a partnership with NYCCAH that provides subsidies and related supports to low-income community members. Finally, participants from these settings as well as individuals referred to this

[1] Food pantries are sites that distribute groceries and other food products for consumption off-site, most typically for at-home preparation. The groceries distributed to clients typically include major staple items such as grains, beans and other proteins, as well as canned fruits and vegetables among others. Foods are usually pre-selected and compiled into bags for easy pick up. In addition, these food distributions tend to include staple items at most food pantries though a smaller percentage of pantries provide for client choice where clients "shop" the pantry shelves for preferred items and are not required to take products they do not typically consume.

study by partners at the East River Development Alliance (ERDA)[2] were recruited for individual in-depth interviews. Thirteen community members participated in formal, semi-structured interviews (see appendix for interview guide) held locally in places such as the public library, the local food pantry, and the participants' own homes. Interview lengths ranged from approximately 30 to 90 minutes. Participant ages ranged from the early 20s to mid 60s. A signature of informed consent was obtained from all participants. The majority of participants were African American with two individuals who identified as White, one as Puerto Rican, and one as Indo-Guyanese. All but three participants were female. In addition, 8 staff members and volunteers from the participating community-based organizations were informally interviewed including two members of NYCCAH, one staff person from HCFP, one volunteer from LIC CSA, and four staff persons from ERDA.

Analysis

Narrative analysis was used to analyze field notes and recorded interviews. According to Chase (2003), narrative analysis incorporates two major principles that encompass the notions of narration serving as a means for people to make sense of their experience and communicate meaning as well as being social in character in so far as telling one's store is a relational act. The narratives were analyzed by employing concepts from the current study's interview guide utilizing the overarching research questions around experiences of the food environment to identify participants' responses to concepts and issues related to issues of race and class. In addition, concepts where simultaneously identified using open coding for emerging themes from participants'

[2] ERDA is a community-based organization that provides housing advocacy, as well as financial and educational support services to tenants in these housing developments.

experiences, observations elicited beyond questions posed through the interview guide. In addition, the constant comparison approach was used to identify and construct categories around the topics of food access and the food environment (Glaser, 1965; Dye et al., 2000). This approach is utilized to help identify the most central themes found in the data across participants.

Results

Food Voice and the Food Environment

In this study, participants explored what foods are and are not available to them in their micro-neighborhood. In describing her navigation of food resources in this location one young mother of four explains:

> "Its hard because, you know, there is absolutely nothing here…you can stop in the delis around here and they might have peppers, or potatoes or onions, but they are all rotten."

She is thoroughly frustrated by the lack of options and the poor quality of food in her neighborhood. The poor quality of food in this area is a consistent theme echoed by many participants exasperated by this common occurrence. Another participant, an African American woman in her late 40s who is the primary food provider for her family of three and a long time resident of the Queensbridge Houses, adds to this discussion stating:

> "[The] quality of food hasn't changed very much… the perishable food isn't cared for very much."

She, too, is concerned about the struggle to find produce that is "cared for" by shopkeepers in the community and, too often, finds that the produce for sale is unacceptable. She extends this concern to other products beyond vegetables as well, reporting:

> "Certain items I can't get in my neighborhood. If I like a certain meat, it's very difficult to get it… it is very difficult to get good quality meat in this area."

Other participants discussed concerns over the poor quality of meat at the local supermarket located within the Queensbridge Houses complex. Members of the LIC FAB also raised this issue noting that, while the meat in the package may look fine while at the supermarket, when they brought it home it "smelled bad and looked green inside." Another participant expands on the issue of the quality of meat at this supermarket stating:

> "At [the supermarket located within Queensbridge Houses], the fish and meat look horrible…so you have to go somewhere else."

The *food voices* of participants in this study communicate a profound dissatisfaction with the food environment in their micro-neighborhood. The common refrain expresses a lack of quality in the basic staples for which they are searching and deep frustration over this condition. In navigating the local food environment, participants' food voices reveal a status quo that speaks to a sense of marginalization in this low-income community. Participants are accustomed to this low quality food environment and point out that "you have to go somewhere else" to seek out greater variety and quality. This ostensibly points to the level of disenfranchisement this community experiences and residents' common practice of traveling to "other" often more economically diverse neighborhoods to find what they are looking for. This issue of travel is important as many participants find it onerous to have to travel given the extra time and financial costs associated with this.

Food Voice and Food Justice

In exploring the quality of the food environment, as discussed above, participants' food voices speak to the spatial inequity of food in this low-income community. A young African American man interviewed for this study puts it succinctly in stating:

"As you move away from the projects the food gets healthier."

There is a matter-of-fact quality to the tone of his voice when he conveys this point. There is no surprise that food is of low quality in this community and that "healthy" foods need to be sought elsewhere. Another interviewee, an African American male in his late 30s, expands on this notion stating:

> "Everything is fast food over here, there is nothing healthy... no good stores around here."

The food voices of participants exploring the issues of access to healthy food in this environment are clearly communicating that there is an association between healthfulness and income in this micro-neighborhood. They perceive that their low-income status as residents in and around "the projects" means that the food nearby is going to be cheap and unhealthy and one expects to find healthier alternatives only by leaving the area. Another participant states plainly how she feels about this:

> "[Its] like I'm being discriminated against…its just impossible to get those things here."

This participant, who identifies as African American, is able to clearly articulate what many participants' food voices also suggest which is that this food environment is discriminatory in its food retail practices.

Moreover, perceptions of the food environment in this micro-neighborhood are bound up in the experience of poverty. The same young male interviewee as above continues:

"There are other problems bigger than food… financial problems."

In this interview focusing on food environments and food practices, he, like many participants, point out that "financial problems" is part and parcel of the food experience in this community. This theme of leaving the neighborhood to access food due to financial circumstances as well as quality is common across participants. An interviewee in her early 60s explains the need to travel out of the area in terms of cost, stating:

> "It's the distance really…I say distance because in order to find a bargain you can't buy [in the neighborhood]...[I] have to go somewhere else because there is only one supermarket in the area and the [price] is so high. So everybody has to go somewhere far out to get a decent bargain..."

Another dimension of the way poverty impacts residents of this food environment is illustrated by the ways in which participants discuss the stigma related to being low-income when interfacing with food retailers. A number of LIC FAB members commented on the experience of being treated "differently" at the supermarket when using their EBT cards[3]. An interviewee, recalling her life-long relationship with food safety net benefits describes an awareness of this differential treatment early on in life explaining:

> "Growing up, when you're a kid on public assistance, you feel kind of outside of things."

Even when not using EBT cards or other food safety net benefits, participants who see that they are perceived as "low-income" report experiences of being treated poorly by

[3] EBT stands for electronic benefits transfer and delivers Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), the current name for Food Stamps, benefits to New York State's recipient population. The EBT card acts like a debit card and can be used at participating food retailers. For additional information on EBT in NYS see: http://otda.ny.gov/programs/ebt/.

store clerks at supermarkets. The same young mother of four, mentioned above, recounts her shopping experience, explaining:

> "When we are on line at the supermarket I can see people looking at us and they are waiting for me to pull out my food stamp card and they look surprised when we pay cash…"

She reflects on the experience of being marked as "other" and treated as "less than" as a resident of this neighborhood and being of minority ethnic or racial status as this women is, being of Porto Rican descent, though born and raised in Queens. These food voices continue to communicate a marginalization and poor treatment of community members based on race and class that speak to a pervasive sense of food injustice in this micro-neighborhood.

Food Voice and the Hierarchy of Food Needs

The food voices of the participants in this study touch on issues related to the Hierarchy of Food Needs as they communicate the practices of provisioning and consuming foods in and around the Queensbridge micro-neighborhood. Satter's first level of *food needs* is concerned with individuals experiencing hunger and the associated anxiety that surrounds getting enough to eat. Here she is concerned with and sensitive to individuals' need to consume energy dense foods which appears reasonable to her in the face of hunger. She indicates that nutritional value is less of a motivator in this state. The food voices of participants in this study tend to confirm this notion in some ways but may challenge it in other ways. As a number of the quotations above suggest, finding enough food in this food environment is not the central issue but this does not mean hunger is absent from this community. In fact, a majority of the participants in this study are

heavily dependent on the emergency food system. This suggests that they face chronic hunger related issues. At the same time, healthfulness and quality are not issues entirely absent from their concerns though at times it may be in heavy competition with getting enough food. One participant, an older adult female and longtime Queensbridge Houses resident, interviewed at the HCFP offered:

> "Food is important because you have to be healthy…I have to stay healthy."

This quotation demonstrates that, even though access to enough food is a challenge for participants, a concern for quality and healthy food endures. This challenges the notion Satter presents constructing the categories in her model as discrete and hierarchical.

In addition, framing the issue of "enough food" as over-riding a concern for healthy food de-contextualizes the lived experiences of individuals facing hunger and food access issues. There are clear barriers to accessing healthy food for many participants in this study. In addition, hunger and dependence on emergency food systems are a common experience. Yet, a concern for health seems to persist but is often expressed in relations to issues of cost and availability. As one interviewee puts it:

> "People don't have the money to buy certain things so they buy what's cheaper but it's not healthy in the long run."

Satter's framing of this level of food need states: "…nutritional value is not a priority guiding food selection" (pS187, 2007). Yet as the participants' statements suggest, it is not a lack of concern for health but rather the prohibitive costs that frequently prevent access to quality food. The presentation of this first level of food need in the current model is so over-simplified that it belies the structural issues that shape food choice when people face hunger. Therefore, the category of "enough food" would benefit by

expanding its explanation to include a discussion of the material barriers to healthful foods frequently faced by low-income individuals.

In the next level of the Hierarchy of Food Needs, Satter positions *acceptable food* as a concern that arises only once "a person is free enough from the threat of hunger…" (p S187, 2007). The category of acceptable food, as she points out, is highly subjective but is steeped in individual values as well as, I would like to add, in the culture. In any case, the concept of acceptable food includes the ability to access it from "acceptable" sources that typically refers to the conventional food system and excludes emergency food resources such as the pantry in this study. There are two major concerns raised by the way Satter's model constructs the category of acceptable food when comparing it to the food voice of participants in this study.

Acceptable food is a fundamental aspect of eating and, in discussing related issues with staff at the HCFP, it is one key factor that leads to food waste. When clients at conventional pantries receive foods that are unacceptable, regardless of their level of "need", they often discard them on site or upon leaving a pantry. The great value in a client choice pantry such as HCFP is that it creates a context in which clients struggling with hunger can decide for themselves what constitutes "acceptable" food. While it may be argued that the participants in this particular study simply do not meet the criteria of what Satter's model intends as "free enough from hunger," their food voice of the quality and healthfulness of food seems to suggest that this is an abiding concern that does not only emerge when hunger is sufficiently satisfied.

Conclusion

Lane et al (2008), note that much psychosocial research points to social and environmental contexts as strong influences on individual food choice and practices. Food voice, utilized as a lens to examine the activities of food, sheds light on the experience of food in a given environment. In this project, food voice affords an opportunity to gain a better understanding of the challenging issues related to race and class in a low-income micro-neighborhood in LIC, NY by providing a space for participants to express their experience challenges in provisioning of food in general as well as discrimination in their food environment that effectively constrain food practice so much that food-voice in this community is often muted or silenced. The economics that shape this food environment, characterized by cheap convenience foods, high-priced corner stores and a low-quality supermarket create barriers for residents to experience a sense of agency in relation to food that in turn makes food more of a burden then a pleasure, let alone an avenue to practice cultural and personal expressions.

In counseling clients, nutrition professionals will only be effective if they demonstrate an awareness of the food environments and related contextual factors of food provisioning their clients face. Satter's Hierarchy of Food Needs provides a nuanced approach to food education for nutrition professionals that extend beyond federally published dietary guidelines. In addition, it attempts to situate dietary education in terms of clients' everyday lives. At the same time, the HFN would benefit from additional analysis and contextualization to better assist clients and nutrition educators alike.

Food voice is a valuable approach to investigating individuals' lived experience through the lens of food and provides a means for addressing the issues of food justice. This approach provides a space to reflect on the ways in which food speaks to the social

and material conditions experienced by people in their everyday lives. As such, it can give voice to the more challenging topics that intersect with food such as race and class. Future research in food justice, utilizing food voice, should continue to examine these intersections and the ways in which they shed light on forms of structural violence. Structure violence is described by Farmer (2004) as "violence exerted systematically - that is, indirectly - by everyone who belongs to a certain social order...the concept of structural violence is intended to inform the study of social machinery of oppression" (p 307). Elements of structural violence include extreme poverty and social marginalization in settings including urban locales in the US and I would suggest it is present in the community of this current study. Furthermore, structural violence is a way to understand the tension between structure and agency in a given context and the material and symbolic aspects of food are particularly well poised to shed further light on these conditions.

Satter's HFN stands as a useful model that can support the work of improving health outcomes related to diet through the work of nutrition education and counseling. The current model, as a direct translation of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, does not incorporate empirical data or additional theory around critical issues of food and provisioning. Future research incorporating different communities, environmental contexts and social, economic and ethnic groups would be useful in further expanding on this model and corresponding applications in dietetic practice.

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Manuscript #3

The Meaning(s) of "Sharing": an examination of discourse, awareness and participation in CSA and other AFNs in a low-income community in New York City

Abstract

There is increasing interest in Alternative food networks (AFNs) within the larger food system. While seeking to address problems in globalized food systems through efforts of re-localizing, AFNs often deploy the language of food justice and strive to expand food access at the community level. However, through current practices, AFNs such as Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) and Farmers Markets tend to be viewed as elitist and can be seen as re-inscribing race and class into these alternative food spaces; creating largely white and middle-class sites of food practice thus excluding vulnerable community members who need and want greater access to healthier and higher quality foods.

This study seeks to understand the current role of AFNs among low-income community members who have been historically marginalized from food systems policy-making. This research project is a qualitative case study of a low-income community in Western Queens, NYC, which examines the perceptions and experiences of the food environment with a focus on how AFNs are experienced by low-income community members. Data for this project were gathered through participant observation and in-depth interviews of residents in and around Queensbridge Houses, the largest housing development in North America, to explore awareness of and access to CSAs and farmers markets along with the conventional retail resources in the community. Issues of race and class along with a critical analysis of the discourse adopted by various stakeholders are examined in this research to conceptualize the current perception and use of AFNs among low-income community members of color.

Introduction

There is increasing interest in Alternative Food Networks (AFNs) within the larger food system. AFNs encompass food provisioning contexts other than the conventional means of supermarkets through the provision of products that are typically high quality and have social and environmental characteristics such as being locally produced and/or organically raised through venues such as farmers markets, food

cooperatives, and community supported agriculture (CSA). Consciousness of the issues related to sustainable food systems has been popularized by films and books that have captured public attention in recent years placing the food movement as a major social and political issue among both academics and the public. In the film, Food, Inc., directors Kennor and Schlosser (2009) attempt to lift the veil on the conventional food system exposing the industrialized and often cruel underbelly that has been hidden from the American consumer. In the US, the conventional food system is now highly centralized and characterized by vertical integration in the control of a few corporations that privilege capital accumulation over human health, the economic and physical wellbeing of producers, and other laborers in the system as well as the overall effect on the environment (Steel, 2008).

The growing awareness and the consequent concern about sustainable food systems has positioned AFNs as a possible antidote to the social, public health, and environmental ills of the conventional food system through its efforts to decentralize power through projects of re-localization and focusing on environmental sustainability in food provisioning. The interest in AFNs as a vehicle to address both sustainability and public health is reflected in the increased presence of AFNs as part of the larger food movement. Food scholar Marion Nestle (2009) describes a growing food studies literature focused on exploring the common goals around the convergence of separate "food-focused movements" coming together around developing a food system that promotes the health of people and the environment. AFNs can be seen as an on-the-ground effort towards achieving the goals of addressing social, health, and environmental problems and have become a growing area of study in social and health sciences research. This paper adds to the discussion of the social implications of AFNs through an

examination of a community supported agriculture (CSA) program in a low-income community in New York City.

Community Supported Agriculture

CSA came to the US around 1980 (MacMillan Uribe et al., 2012). CSA provides a model wherein consumers take a direct stake in a farm by providing funding for the operational costs directly to the farmer before crops are planted and then receive a "share" of the produce throughout the growing season. This marketing strategy requires shareholder members to share the risk along with farmers insofar as there is no guarantee regarding the amount of produce members receive in exchange for their seasonal investment (Forbes and Harmon, 2007).

Forbes and Harmon (2007) describe member benefits as including: "improved nutrition, economic savings, increased food security, and knowledge about the source of one's food" (p66). CSA increases access to fresh high quality produce and thus contributes to community food security. CSA, as a source of fresh, high quality produce has a clear appeal to public health professionals and policy makers. Recently, for example, in Southern Massachusetts, the Southcoast Health System started a CSA to connect produce from a local farm to the community (Allard, 2013). This CSA project is geared toward serving hospital employees in their system as well as the general public. In a recent press release, it was described as follows:

> "Members of the CSA pre-pay for a "share" of the farm and pick up a variety of fresh in-season produce each week. Consumers can elect to receive a full-share or half-share, depending on the size of their family. 'It's economical,' said Kerry Mello, community benefits manager for Southcoast Health System. "We're increasing access to fresh vegetables and other produce."

Thus, for this health care system, CSA becomes another practice of health promotion by "increasing access to fresh vegetables"; which is often evoked as a proxy for good health. Indeed, CSAs with their spatial flexibility can have distribution sites located in many places that potentially lack this access. All is that is needed is a location for the farm's delivery, some storage space, and access to the community. This flexibility makes CSA a prime intervention for the growing concerns around food access.

CSAs and Food Access

While seeking to address problems in globalized food systems through efforts of re-localizing, AFNs often deploy the language and values of food justice and strive to expand food access at the community level. However, through current practices, AFNs such as CSA and Farmers Markets, tend to be viewed as elitist and can be seen as re-inscribing race and class into these alternative food spaces; creating largely white and middle-class sites of food practice, thus excluding vulnerable community members who need and want greater access to healthier and higher quality foods (Slocum, 2006, Allen, 2008). Forbes and Harmon (2007) point out that consumers with limited financial resources face barriers to joining CSA and thus do not realize the benefit from this increased food spatial food access. The authors suggest innovative strategies be explored to expand access to CSAs to increase nutrition for limited resourced families and individuals. In their review of 17 CSAs across the US, Forbes and Harmon (2007) discuss strategies used to expand access that include: acceptance of government assistance (depending on individual state regulations), payment plans, working shares, subsidized low-income shares, low-cost shares, transportation support, and bartering. While many of these strategies provide pathways to access, still many CSAs report just a small proportion - about 5% - of members take advantage of these opportunities (Forbes

and Harmon, 2007). This may be due to lack of awareness around these programs in particular and CSAs in general since much of outreach is informal word of mouth.

Problem Statement

The current study seeks to understand the current role of AFNs in general, with a focus on a local CSA, among low-income community members who have been historically marginalized from food systems policy-making. This research project is a qualitative case study of a low-income community in Western Queens, NYC, which examines the perceptions and experiences of the food environment with a focus on how AFNs are experienced by low-income community members. Data for this project were gathered through participant observation and in-depth interviews of residents in and around Queensbridge Houses, the largest housing development in North America, to explore awareness and access to CSAs and farmers markets along with the conventional retail resources in the community. Issues of race and class, along with a critical analysis of the discourse adopted by various stakeholders are examined in this research to conceptualize the current perception and use of AFNs among low-income community members of color.

Guthman (2008a) points out that food-movement advocates have deployed AFNs, including CSA, as a means to address problems of access in low-income and minority communities. Many of the actors participating in these alternative food access projects incorporate the notion of food justice as a framework and rational for these efforts. Alkon and Agyeman (2011) propose a framework for an approach to food justice that ties together environmental justice, social justice, and sustainability. It outlines various related discourses including those from the dominant food movement and public health.

Specifically, Alkon and Agyeman interrogate food movements as a form of "monoculture" that marginalizes or ignores socio-structural issues of race and class and the ways in which these issues impact individuals' experiences in the conventional and alternative food systems. Alkon and Agyeman highlight the notion of "positionality" as a framework for "understanding that our lived experiences, particularly those of race, class, and gender shape our worldviews" (p3). This concept is the key organizing approach in work interrogating the ways in which these factors and the frequent 'blindness' to them shape the food system and create or maintain injustices.

Guthman (2008b) elaborates on the notion of "color blindness" suggested by the work of Alkon and Agyeman. The notion of color blindness is applied as a critique of the efforts to minimize the role of cultural coding and, specifically, white middle-class coding that takes place in AFN practices, spaces, and discourse. Thus, color-blindness is, in effect, an effort to avoid looking at issues of race and class by universalizing the values and appeal of food and the food movement in the case of AFN related practices. Food justice is a framework that seeks to remedy the subtle forms of exclusivity that get encoded into food movement work including AFNs. This framework, as articulated by the New York City based advocacy organization Just Food (2013) is an alternative approach to food security that wherein "communities exercising their right to grow, sell, and eat healthy food. Healthy food is fresh, nutritious, affordable, culturally-appropriate… and people practicing food justice leads to a strong local food system, self-reliant communities and a healthy environment." Thus, food justice sets the stage for community members to have agency in the food system in ways that are both socially and environmental responsible. Utilizing the framework of food justice to critically assess AFNs and the role of color blindness in the current study aim to elucidate these processes

in order to explore the potential for transformation of food systems and food environments to practices, spaces, and discourses that are meaningfully inclusive and participatory.

Methods and Procedures

This project examines the issues of food access and practices and grows out of my participation with members of the Long Island City Food Action Board (LIC FAB) held twice monthly in Long Island City, NY. The LIC FAB is a grassroots community organization composed of people living in the neighborhoods of Long Island City and Astoria in western Queens, NY. The participants involved in the LIC FAB are primarily African American and Hispanic, low-income, and range in age from early to older adulthood. This group met regularly to engage in advocacy related training and to discuss and address issues related to poverty, hunger, and food access. I initially became involved with the LIC FAB as a community member and representative of a developing food co-op in the community. All the members of LIC FAB have had direct experience with food insecurity and are actively involved in their communities addressing related issues.

I conducted participant observation at regular meetings and events related to the activities of the LIC FAB through the winter of 2011. In addition, to address the presence and possibilities associated with AFNs in this community, I conducted participant observation at the Long Island City Community Supported Agriculture (LIC CSA) during their winter and regular season pick-ups from 2011-2012. The LIC CSA was chosen as a site for participant observation (PO) because its drop-off site is currently located at a food pantry in the heart of the study micro-neighborhood. In addition, the LIC CSA aims to

extend access to low-income community members through the support of the New York City Coalition Against Hunger (NYCCAH).

In order to examine the intrapersonal and social experiences of food practices that I have identified in my research question, I conducted individual in-depth interviews to explore the activities and meanings related to food provisioning by informants. In-depth individual interviews have been conducted with participants of the LIC FAB, members of the LIC CSA, and residents in the community identified by informants or referred by staff at local community based organizations (CBOs). All interviews were conducted during the study period of 2010-2012 and lasted from 30-90 minutes. 13 community members participated in formal semi-structured interviews that took place in community settings including the local branch of the public library, the local food pantry as well as in participants' homes. Participants' ages ranged from early 20s through late 60s. A signature of informed consent was obtained from all participants. The majority of participants were African American with two individuals who identified as White, one as Puerto Rican, and one as Indo-Guyanese. All but three participants were female. In addition, 8 staff members and volunteers from the participating CBOs were informally interviewed including two members of NYCCAH, one staff from Hour Children Food Pantry (HCFP), one volunteer from the LIC CSA, and four staff from the East River Development Alliance (ERDA).

Interviews were open-ended with questions directed at exploring issues related to how individuals think about food in their everyday lives and the ways in which their food environments impact their food provisioning activities. Questions included in the interview guide (see appendix for full interview guide) addressed topics around the food

environment in this micro-neighborhood and included questions related to AFNs. Examples of questions asked include:

- What are the food choices like your neighborhood?
- Do you have any problems getting food for you and your household?
- Are you familiar with alternatives such as famers markets, community supported agriculture and coops? If so, what do you think of them?
    - Are there any in your community?
    - Do you know anyone who uses them? If YES - What do they think about them?

The interview narratives and field notes were analyzed by employing concepts from the interview guide while simultaneously using open coding for emerging themes from participants' experiences, observations, and interactions. In addition, the constant comparison approach was used to identify and construct categories around the topics of food access and the food environment (Glaser, 1965; Dye et al., 2000). This approach is utilized to help identify the most central themes found in the data across participants. In addition, content analysis of archival materials for the LIC CSA have been included in order to situate the relevant concepts and rhetoric used by this organization in engaging with community members.

Setting

The Queensbridge Houses is the largest public housing development in North America and was built in 1939. Queensbridge Houses, often referred to simply as "Queensbridge", is located in the borough of Queens, in New York City, within the neighborhood of Long Island city (LIC). It houses nearly 7000 people and, because of its scale and density, Queensbridge is sometimes denoted as a city within a city. The community of Queensbridge is located in Western Queens in New York City. This micro-

neighborhood is located along the East River to the west of the housing development and is bordered to the south by Queens Boulevard – a 12 lane roadway with the entrance of the 59th Street Bridge at its western edge. To the east of this community is 21st Street, which is an industrial and commercial corridor mainly populated by warehouses, car washes, and auto-parts stores. To the north of Queensbridge is mixed industrial space including the large Ravenswood Power Plant.

Results

LIC CSA – "Making vegetables available…"

The LIC CSA is distinctive from more typical CSAs in that it aims to expand access to low-income community members along with sharing the more common values of CSA including concern for the environment and support of local food. In addition, the LIC CSA is uniquely positioned to extend access through the support of the New York City Coalition against Hunger (NYCCAH) that provides professional staff to help volunteers organize, conduct outreach, and subsidize low-income membership. In a conversation with a core-group volunteer[4], it was pointed out to me that NYCCAH provides a level of organization and support that most CSAs don't enjoy including systematic outreach, funding, and accounting without which the CSA would not be able to provide the cost savings and related financial support to low-income members[5]. In

[4] CSAs are typically all volunteer run, with a "core group" – volunteers who commit to specific central roles vital to the functioning of the CSA across the entire season.
[5] NYCCAH subsidizes low-income shares by providing a revolving loan wherein farmers are paid for low-income members' shares upfront and the members, in turn, pay weekly using their EBT benefit over the course of the season. This allows the farmer to have the financing needed to prepare for the growing season while providing low-income

principle, this added support uniquely positions the LIC CSA to address the pervasive concerns around food access experienced by community members.

One of the most salient findings of this project has been the limited awareness of and notable absence of low-income community members of color in relation to the LIC CSA. The LIC CSA exists in one of the most ethnically and economically diverse areas in the US with over 40% of the population of Queens, NYC, being foreign born (US Census, accessed April 2013). The CSA is hosted at the HCFP, a local emergency food resource center serving the low-income population and is within a 10-minute walk from Queensbridge Houses and located adjacent to Ravenswood Houses. Residents in these public housing developments have consistently expressed concerns around access to food. One participant, a young mother of four and long time resident of Queensbridge Houses reported:

> "I think a lot of the community members have the same issues as me. I went to a tenants association meeting recently and… where a social services agency from NYCHA [New York City Housing Authority] was there asked the tenants what they need and many people said fresh veggies."

This participant suggested that, in an open conversation about community needs, the tenants spontaneously and consistently reported concerns around food access and specifically about the limited access to healthful quality foods and affordability of food in and around the community. Furthermore, in conversations with staff members of the East River Development Association (ERDA), one of the central CBOs serving this community, staff members reported that residents frequently express concerns around the

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members with the flexibility of paying over the course of several months rather in the single lump sum typical of CSAs.

quality and availability of food in this neighborhood. Another participant, a young man and resident of Queensbridge Houses for nearly a decade explains:

> "As you move away from the projects the food gets healthier."

He shares the concern voiced above related to the quality of food found in this micro-neighborhood pointing out that, in order to access healthier food options, residents need to travel outside of the area.

Since recent literature reports CSA as leading to increased produce consumption (Cohen et al., 2012), this mode of food access is poised as a potential means to address the access related concerns reported in the community. Indeed, the LIC CSA promotes the program on their website by stating:

> "Our mission is to make **inexpensive, fresh, organic,** and **locally-grown** vegetables available to everyone in our community and to support local agriculture." (Emphasis original)

Here emphasis is given to the role of CSA as an inexpensive source of produce in the community. The LIC CSA further highlights efforts at expanding access through affordability by featuring as one of the benefits of joining this CSA as:

> **"**The cost of becoming a member is much less than what you would spend at the grocery store. Meal for meal, membership is less than 10% the cost of fast food! "

This benefit of affordability is the second benefit listed on their website (after health) of joining the LIC CSA. Here an attempt to highlight the economic value of joining the LIC CSA is made through comparisons of CSA with both supermarkets and fast food in order to appeal to low-income members, demonstrating a concern on the part of the LIC CSA and likely of their partner organization NYCCAH, to make this CSA both accessible and appealing to residents who may be primarily concerned with cost. This is an important

strategy given the concern over finances in this community. The young man above continues:

"There are other problems bigger than food… financial problems"

In discussing the food environment with this resident, he suggests that economic issues and ultimately the concentration of poverty found in this community basically eclipse concerns around food though they are clearly intertwined. Given the interest among many stakeholders, including residents, CBO staff, and LIC CSA volunteers around increasing food access, the LIC CSA is well poised to address some of these issues. However, the majority of my interview participants who lived in and around the micro-neighborhood of Queensbridge were unaware of the CSA despite the fact that many of them attended the food pantry where the CSA was hosted. In addition, it is likely that the subsidies made available for low-income members are not sufficient to address their financial need. The subsidies are provided through the use of revolving loans, which supply an option to pay weekly using EBT. Yet, community members' benefits are not nearly enough to cover their food needs as it is and are often depleted early in the month. Thus, even with EBT as a payment option the cost may remain a barrier.

In examining the LIC CSA's presentation of their program in conjunction with an analysis of the experience of low-income residents in this food environment, three central areas of concern emerged. First, I would like to acknowledge here that CSAs in general and the LIC CSA in this specific discussion are admirable in their efforts to work at increasing access to quality produce. However, this research project identifies disconnects among and within CSA culture in relation to the low-income residents in this micro-neighborhood. In particular, differences in discourses, practices, and values related

to food characterize the experiences of these groups and the challenges faced in promoting CSA among community members who are specifically seeking to increase food access. Thus, even though the LIC CSA explicitly aims to be accessible to the broader community it may not succeed due, in part, to their own approach in communicating and expressing values and priorities of the CSA.

Context: "Embarking on a gourmet adventure"

Participants of the LIC CSA create a space of food practice that is imbued with specific meanings through the way the CSA is described by members, outreach volunteers, workers, literature, and advertising materials. The LIC CSA promotes their program through word-of-mouth and by distributing fliers (see appendix for example of an LIC CSA flier) throughout the community as well as at their pick-up site at HCFP. In addition, posters and signage describing the CSA and representing images of their partner farm are posted on the walls at the pantry. A core-group volunteer describes their outreach practices as essentially ad hoc with the group's website as the main source of member recruitment. As noted above, there is a clear effort at highlighting the affordability of this project in the LIC CSA outreach and informational materials but, at the same time, other meanings are communicated. The LIC CSA describes in outreach materials:

> "Becoming a member of the CSA is like embarking on a gourmet adventure. Each week you receive a variety of freshly picked vegetables."

This excerpt attempts to describe the experience of CSA by suggesting a spirit of adventure. This is a reflection of the departure CSA takes from conventional means of

sourcing food. Here the CSA itself can be seen as exotic and, in some ways, the foreignness of this term alone may be drawn out as a likely explanation for the lack of awareness community members have for this food resource. Furthermore, this statement expresses the aesthetic qualities of food that reflect a food-centeredness that is not universal. The young male resident mentioned above in reflecting on food practices and preferences simply states:

> "I think about it when I get hungry."

Food here is a practical matter, not a gourmet opportunity. In fact, many residents of this low-income community expressed similar views of food that are ultimately utilitarian. Another long-time resident who is an African-American women in her late 40s adds"

> "Sometimes I go on strike when they don't appreciate me…it works out because my son will take over the kitchen for that day… Mom will give hints…"

While this participant has expressed to me that food is important to her, it is often seen as a chore rather than a source of pleasure. Hence it is unlikely that this particular image of CSA participation would resonate with many community members who may share these points of view. Therefore, while CSA members who, for the most part, are well resourced and seek out food opportunities such as these may value these images of food and CSA as evoked by the notion of a gourmet food adventure, this reflects an important divergence in the ways in which low-income members engage meanings of food.

Discourse: "Looking to become a member"

The language deployed in encountering phenomena, including the food system, shapes the ways in which it is perceived, experienced, and ultimately practiced by various users. Campbell (1998) suggests that scholars and policy makers focus on the importance

of language in shaping thought and perception related to food and hunger in particular. The discourse of CSA is highly specialized and filled with jargon that may not be obvious to non-users or those outside of the food movement. The use of this specialized language permeates the CSAs' promotional literature as well as conversation in ordinary settings such as meetings, informal encounters among CSA members, and volunteers meetings. An effort to promote the LIC CSA on their website is illustrative:

> "If you are looking to become a member of the LIC CSA … we will have shares available for purchase."

This statement appears commonplace to long-time CSA members but concepts such as "member" and "shares available for purchase" along with CSA itself are less transparent to the community at large. In contrast, a long-time resident of Queensbridge Houses with an awareness (though not a member) of the LIC CSA reflects:

> "…I think if they described it differently too…you can get a 'full share'…and I'm like what do you mean by a share? They should do it by bag or by family…like this is for a family of four. Residents aren't going to take the time to understand that…as far as how they explain it, we were really are all like huh?"

It is not obvious what a "share" in this context means and thus the ability to utilize CSA with the goal of increasing access to produce in this community becomes undermined due to this discursive disconnect among typical CSA participants and low-income community members in this micro-neighborhood.

The abbreviation "CSA" is itself unfamiliar, as noted earlier, to the vast majority of community members with whom I spoke during this study. Again, this is an interesting finding given that the CSA is advertised within the pantry and around the neighborhood. Yet, its uncommonness from the food discourses of low-income community members renders it unmemorable or somehow outside the awareness of most of the residents

interviewed. The few residents who had some awareness of the CSA, but did not participate in it even though they are interested in increased access to produce, discussed it and expressed concern and confusion around the language deployed by this mode of food provisioning. As one particularly insightful core-group volunteer, who is also a life-long resident of this community, pointed out:

> "CSA is hard to explain…more outreach needs to be done. The word CSA is so tough for people."

Volunteers and members of the CSA are genuinely vested in the process of expanding access to fresh produce through CSA but they themselves continue to struggle with how to communicate what and how CSA is and works.

Another example of the way language is used by those inside the CSA that may obfuscate what CSA is and does to those on the outside is the term "member" which is integral to the CSA model and ethic. Participants in CSAs are not merely consumers or customers but are, instead, members of an organization that supports an independent small farm in return for a share of produce during the growing season. This membership, unlike being a customer in more conventional provisioning contexts involves a commitment in advance of and for the duration of the growing season in a given year. Examples of discursive practices like these demonstrate a specialized form of language that AFNs such as CSA use in their approach to food provisioning that can be alienating to those who, while they are interested in finding additional food resources, do not connect with this terminology.

Practice: "Committing to purchase"

Along with a particular discourse, CSA as a means of food provisioning involves a specific purchasing structure that is quite different from the conventional food system. CSA typically involves a financial commitment in advance of the growing season – a clear contrast to conventional food provisioning – wherein members pay up front for the produce they will receive in the months to come (see appendix for example of LIC CSA member contract). The LIC CSA full share price ranges from $370 for low-income members (household income below $25,000) to $595 for higher income households (income above $50,000) with participants paying exclusively with SNAP (food stamps) charged $165 for the 2012 season. NYCCHA provides subsidies and logistical support to make the sliding scale of this CSA possible and thus makes this CSA more financially accessible to low-income members as compared to typical CSAs that do not have funds to support low-income membership. It is also important to note that the LIC CSA taking food stamps is unusual for CSAs though this is a strategy of increasing interest among advocates aiming to make CSA more accessible. While the SNAP[6] provision includes a payment plan to accommodate the nature of SNAP disbursement, membership is still a commitment and cannot be discontinued during the season if the member is unsatisfied with the CSA in any way.

The 2012 LIC CSA Membership Agreement includes a statement that members sign off on committing to "pick[ing] up [the] share …from June 6 through November 7." Members thus commit to the CSA for six months regardless of their satisfaction with this food provisioning practice. On the CSAs website, membership is described as:

[6] Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) is the current name for Food Stamps benefits. This is the primary federal food safety net program in the US.

> "By becoming a member, you are committing to purchase a share from the farmer each week through the entire season. Your membership is an investment in the Farm at Miller's Crossing, in your community, and in your health. You cannot quit the program, as your vegetables have already begun growing."

The commitment to the entire season as noted in the contract and the website emphasize the nature of the commitment involved with participating in CSA. Yet, even though the issue of CSA membership as a season-long commitment is emphasized, it is still difficult to communicate. In speaking with a core group volunteer, she noted that the commitment of CSA membership is a difficult concept to convey and that there has been conflict in previous years when members, particularly low-income members, have questioned this commitment. Conflict arose when members were not satisfied with the CSA and sought to exit not being clear that the commitment was for the duration of the season. One low-income member of the LIC CSA, a long-time Queensbridge Houses resident, interviewed for this study identified this as a concern though she was satisfied with the CSA overall. She explains:

> "CSA is less expensive but it's more of a long-term commitment…where the CSA you have ordered food for months."

This long-term commitment can be difficult to imagine for most people used to making food choices on an on-going basis. In addition to this commitment, if a share is not picked up during a given distribution, that member loses it for that week. The LIC CSA website posts"

> "Shares that are not picked up will be donated to local emergency food providers."

While it may be comforting to know that the food from one's share will not be wasted and instead will be donated to the pantry, this may be particularly difficult for low-

income CSA members depending on that week's share and with limited financial resources to make up for the loss. A low-income CSA member, an African-American single mother who lives in the surrounding community, recounts such an experience:

> "I had no one to pick them up so I missed my vegetables. It's only once a week…it kind of sucks that you lose that whole week's worth of food."

Given the difficult financial situations of low-income community members, this loss of the week's vegetables can be experienced as a major disappointment as well as a financial loss given that the share is paid for whether it is picked up or not.

In addition to the seasonal commitment required by CSA, the LIC CSA, like most CSAs, requires volunteering. The LIC CSA, like most, is volunteer run with a core group of volunteers who do the bulk of administrative work. In addition, the weekly pickup and other activities (such as social events) are maintained by a volunteer requirement that is attached to membership requiring a minimum of four hours per season as stipulated in the Membership Agreement. The volunteer requirement is mandatory for all members. This practice does not recognize the possible burden that this may place on some members who may have greater difficulty with support around daily life activities like family care-giving or for those who work multiple jobs as several interviewees in this study discussed.

Values

While there is a clear intention to address issues related to food access through the work of the LIC CSA and their partnership with NYCCAH, like most CSAs, there is also a great focus on the values related to agro-economic and environmental concerns. These concerns seek to address the injuries placed on people and the environment by the larger

corporate food regime characterized by negative environmental externalities and agricultural consolidation that displaces small and medium sized farms (Holt-Gimenez, 2011). While the values of CSA and, by extension, the larger food movement are concerned with issues of access, equity, and structural issues that produce differences based on race and class, CSA in practice tends to emphasize the issues of local food and farmer support and thus de-emphasizes concerns related to food access faced by low-income community members.

The LIC CSA, like most CSAs, aims to connect community members with a specific farm in the region to provide local food to the community. The LIC CSA is partnered with the Farm at Miller's Crossing, a 200-acre organic farm in the Hudson Valley region of New York State. The Farm at Miller's Crossing's website further expounds on the values of CSA explaining:

> "The economic philosophy behind Community Supported Agriculture is one of shared risk. Unlike a co-op, farmers and members share the risks involved in agriculture as well as the bounty of the harvest. Shareholders support the farm through pre-season payment. This membership fee allows the farmer to avoid borrowing money for early season/ pre-produce expenses. In return for this investment the farm is managed to provide members with a diverse distribution of the highest quality seasonal produce."

While the LIC CSA does emphasize the affordability and quality of the food available through the CSA, local food is also highlighted and reflects the role that this issue has in CSA discourse where it is a prominent value featured. Hence, the support of local agriculture is a central value that shapes the experience of CSA and thus CSA participation. This explanation of CSA outlines the value of shortening the chain between the consumer and farmer creating an economically supportive context for farmers that

minimize their financial risk to preserve a way of life as well as a rural landscape. This value is consistent with food justice as it seeks to resist the conventional food system that constructs a food regime that marginalizes and displaces small producers.

Farmer support, another key value in CSA, indeed one of the original driving values that spurred the development of CSA, is emphasized on in the quote above. At the same time, however, privileging the role of the farmer and local food produces a value system that does not necessarily reflect the priorities of low-income community members in this micro-neighborhood. Financial problems weigh heavily on the minds of low-income residents in this micro-neighborhood. Moreover, while the LIC CSA is able to accept food-stamps/SNAP, this does not necessarily provide a solution. As one-low income community member, a woman in her late 20s identifying as Porto Rican, notes:

> "We don't qualify for food stamps…I would do anything for $100/month! Everything comes out of pocket."

For her, and many other low-income members, SNAP is just beyond reach whether due to just missing income requirement cut-offs, or like many residents have reported informally, the onerous nature of applying for the benefit to begin with. Ultimately, enough food and having the resources to acquire food are the most dominant concerns among low-income community members in this study who are primarily concerned with access in terms of affordability as well as geo-spatial proximity. Most community members with whom I spoke indicated that, if they are familiar with CSA at all, they are not able to recognize any financial incentive in participating in CSA. This is the case even though the LIC CSA, in partnership with NYCCAH, works hard to increase access to this food resource. Thus, in the case of the LIC CSA, the emphasis on the values of

supporting farmers and a local agriculture may serve to drown out the messages of affordability.

Conclusion

The overarching research question driving this project has been around how low-income community members in the micro-neighborhood of Queensbridge in Long Island City, NY, experience their food environment. Specifically, given the concern over the limited availability of fresh produce in this community among participants, this study aims to address how community stakeholders perceive and interact with AFNs. The LIC CSA makes great efforts, like many CSAs, to expand the accessibility to fresh high quality produce to low-income members but is compromised by the ways in which this project is enacted which takes for granted assumptions around discourse, practice, and values that do not resonate with low-income community members as evidenced in part by the lack of participation and awareness of the CSA by these residents.

There are many ways that race, class, and other socio-cultural values are encoded into alternative food spaces such as CSA. Food related discourses, values, and practices, even within well-intentioned alternative food projects may convey racialized and classed meanings that contribute to an exclusionary food environment. Guthman points out that that process occurs similarly in farmers markets in which black shoppers must overcome the whiteness of market spaces (2008b). In her project, she discusses how spaces of food are culturally coded in ways that contribute to the reproduction of a white, middle-class space that ultimately proves exclusionary regardless of the explicit goals of expanding food access (Guthman 2008a, Guthman 2008b). She notes the problem of unconscious

habits of white privilege that are bound up with colorblind approaches to food projects that prefer not to focus on race and class in an effort to emphasize the universal aspects of food. These projects construct food in and through these alternative practices that assume a shared or universal meaning around notions of quality, ethics, and aesthetics that are unlikely to resonate with all groups and through these related discourses produce an "otherness" that reflects race and class writ large in the food system as well as other aspects of social practices particularly concerning health. While the LIC CSA may be more diverse than more typical CSAs, given its location and the population it aims to serve it remains largely more white and middle-class than the surrounding community.

LIC CSA, like most CSAs, deploys language and is practiced in a way that is illegible to many low-income community members with whom I have spoken through the course of this study. The residents who live in and around the Queensbridge and Ravenswood Houses in LIC clearly are concerned about and want greater access to good quality produce. CSA is poised as a means to address this concern with its mission of bringing in high quality produce. However, it remains invisible to the majority of low-income community members with whom I spoke and thus creates a different barrier to this form of food provisioning that is characterized by socio-cultural factors. These conditions ultimately undermine the CSA's interest in increasing food access in this community.

CSA is a way of getting food – a peculiar way at that, which does not fit the needs and lifestyle of many in this study. The language used including the term "CSA" itself presents problems in communicating this food-provisioning scheme to community members who may benefit from it. In addition, CSA membership and the level of commitment in particular may be difficult for low-income members to work with, further

minimizing the potential contribution of food access through this means to this segment of the community. Thus, while the LIC CSA seeks to address food justice, it continues to serve more typical AFN consumers/community members of higher income and who are less diverse than the immediate and surrounding neighborhood in general. This suggests that the discourses, practices, and values of the CSA are further reproducing, albeit unintentionally, the racialized and class-based disparities extant in the larger food system.

If CSAs are to realize their potential of addressing food access and food justice, it is vital that this practice of alternative food practice engage in a praxis that critically reflects on the pit-falls and unconscious habits of privilege that are often present and reflected in related discourses, practices, and values that ultimately reproduce exclusionary food spaces that fall short of providing healthy high quality foods to community members who are in great need of this expanded access. CSAs such as LIC would benefit from openly engaging with low-income community members to identify ways in which they can highlight the potential contribution of CSA using language that reflects the experiences of these community members and meets them on their terms. To this end, it may be helpful for CSAs to consider working more closely with low-income community members as partners in organizing and presenting CSA as a means of food access rather than reproducing top-down strategies that continue to marginalize these vulnerable community members.

Yet, given the challenges faced in this community, it is crucial to reflect on whether or to what extent CSA is a viable model for increasing food access in low-income minority communities. CSA present a number of practical as well cultural barriers to use by community members in general, let alone more vulnerable residents that have fewer

resources and less flexibility that are needed for CSA participation. These challenges suggest that AFN advocates must think creatively if they are to meaningfully engage in the work increasing food access in marginalized populations. One innovative strategy to connect local farms with low-income communities in NYC is through the food justice organization, Just Food's Fresh Food for All Program. Just Food has partnered with several organizations to provide funding to support farmers growing specifically to distribute food for free at food pantries throughout NYC. Currently, this program supplies fresh local produce to 48 pantries and soup kitchens (Just Food, nd) distributing these vegetables to over 3000 community members across the five boroughs.

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Appendix 1

Example LIC CSA Flier

Fresh Produce

Come check it out...

THE LIC CSA's

(Community Supported Agriculture)
First Distribution & Sign Up
Wednesday June 2nd 4pm – 7pm

At the Jacob A. Riis Neighborhood Settlement House
10-25 41st Avenue Long Island City, NY 11101

YOU CAN SIGN UP RIGHT THERE AND THEN!

http://liccsa.wordpress.com

Appendix

LIC CSA Member Contract

the Farm
at Miller's Crossing

Long Island City CSA Membership Agreement

Phone: 212-825-0028 Ext. 201 Website: http://liccsa.wordpress.com

Our CSA is a partnership between the Long Island City community and the New York City Coalition Against Hunger.

A. Your Contact Information

Name(s)	Phone
Address	Email(s)
	Preferred Method of Contact: ☐ Phone / ☐ Email

B. Vegetable Share

Full Share: **Enough vegetables for 3-4 people every week for 22 weeks**
Half Share: **Enough vegetables for 1-2 people every week for 22 weeks**

Food Stamp/SNAP Benefit Payment Plan	○ $165 Whole Share in SNAP payment only ○ $85 Half Share in SNAP payment only
Household Income Below $25,000	○ $370 Whole Share ○ $202 Half Share
Household Income $25,000 - $35,000	○ $470Whole Share ○ $250 Half Share
Household Income $35,000 - $50,000	○ $560 Whole Share ○ $300 Half Share
Household Income Above $50,000	○ $595 Whole Share ○ $320 Half Share

C. Fruit Share (order only if you've purchased a vegetable share)

Fruit shares run for 22 weeks. Payments below cover 22 weeks of delivery.

Food Stamp/SNAP Benefit Payment Plan	○ $65 Whole Share in SNAP payment only ○ $35 Half Share in SNAP payment only
Household Income Below $25,000	○ $140 Whole Share ○ $75 Half Share
Household Income $25,000 - $35,000	○ $185 Whole Share ○ $95 Half Share
Household Income $35,000 - $50,000	○ $220 Whole Share ○ $110 Half Share
Household Income Above $50,000	○ $235 Whole Share ○ $120 Half Share

D. Total Amount Due

Vegetable Share	$
Fruit Share	$
Fees **(not applicable for the SNAP/Food Stamp Benefit Payment Plan)** *$10 for administrative costs and $2 for membership in Just Food*	**$ 12**
Donation *Please note that no goods or services were rendered in exchange for this contribution and therefore this gift is fully tax-deductible in accordance with Federal law.*	$
Total	$

E. Payment Options for Above Total

Full Payment Enclosed Amount Enclosed ⇨	
Payment Plan *10% minimum deposit required by March 30 to secure your share; full payment due May 18.* Amount Enclosed ⇨	
Food Stamps/SNAP (fees and deposit not required if paying with SNAP/Food Stamp Benefits) *SNAP portion paid weekly during the season* *Vegetables:* Full- $7.50/week; Half- $3.86/week *Fruit:* Full- $2.95/week; Half- $1.59/week	

F. Membership Agreement

I commit to membership in the Long Island City CSA for the 2012 season. I will pick up my share on Wednesdays, between 5 p.m. and 8 p.m. at Hour Children located at 36-49 11th Street, Long Island City, from June 6 through November 7.

As a member, I commit to supporting the farm through timely payments, and I commit to supporting the CSA by completing 4 hours of volunteer time over the 2012 season, either through two, 2-hour shifts at the distribution site or in another way. I understand that if I don't pick up my share, my food will be donated to Hour Children Food Pantry, our distribution partner, and given out to its patrons.

CSA members join with their farmer in both the risks of farming (crop failure, poor weather, etc.) and its benefits (a bountiful harvest season). I understand that my share will vary from week to week, generally consisting of 6-10 different seasonal vegetables, and that there is no guarantee on the exact amount or contents of my share. The shares will vary in weight, size, and type of vegetables. I understand that this partnership requires flexibility, as human error is inherent in such a partnership.

By participating in this CSA, I am bringing healthy, locally grown food to the neighborhood, supporting alternative agriculture, building community, and making the world a better place…Sign me up!

Signature:_____
Date: _____

G. Volunteer Agreement

My household will satisfy the 4 hour volunteer commitment during the 2012 season by (select at least one option below):

○ Helping at distribution: Where help is needed most! Volunteers will sign up for 1-, 2-, or 4-hour shifts on Wednesdays at Hour Children.
○ Contributing to the Newsletter: These are preferably people with professional writing and/or photography experience.
○ Helping with Outreach: This may include creating flyers/brochures, contacting community organizations and more.
○ Helping with a Group Activity/Event: Tasks may include contacting neighborhood venues or creating flyers/brochures.

I'd like to help the CSA Core Group run the Long Island City CSA. Please contact me about how I can get involved! ☐

Coming Soon… extra items forms!

How did you find out about us?

Your contact information may be shared with our partner farms for communications related to the CSA. To opt out, please check this box

Make check or money order payable to "NYCCAH" and mail it with this form by May 18 to:

New York City Coalition Against Hunger
50 Broad Street, Suite 1520
New York, NY 10004

Conclusion:
Food Justice and Understanding Access in an Under-served Food Environment

The research for this dissertation examined the experiences and perceptions of residents living in a low-income urban environment in the Queensbridge area of Long Island City (LIC), NY. I examined how their encounters with the food environment in their micro-neighborhood inform an understanding of food access. I listened to participants' "food voice" to identify how the ways they did and did not talk about food express important meanings about their experience of accessing food in this space and place. I also investigated the presence of a community supported agriculture (CSA) program in this community to explore the perceptions and possibilities of alternative food networks as a contribution to food access for Queensbridge area residents. In this concluding chapter, I will describe how food justice as an analytic framework has extended my understanding of food practices in this community that is actively concerned with food access in their micro-neighborhood. I will conclude with a discussion of how this case study extends the literature on public health and food policy along with a brief discussion of areas of future research.

Food Justice and Understanding Access

Currently there is a lively, multi-vocal food movement active in the US and globally that works to address many aspects of food systems from production to consumption (Nestle, 2009). The common thread through these food movements is a concern over notions of "good" food, from perspectives that range from focusing on the aesthetic and pleasurable

aspects of eating, to concerns over the environmental consequences of various modes of production. Food justice is a relatively new approach to the food movement gaining ground over the past decade. Gottlieb (2009) points out that food justice puts issues of equity, empowerment, and social change at the forefront in working towards food system change. This has been relevant to the evolution of my work in that I come to food access from an earlier focus on sustainable food movements and, through this process, have seen the need for food justice in creating a truly sustainable food system. Food justice informs the efforts of food movements seeking to address issues of fairness and power in the food system.

My aim in this current study has been to utilize food justice as an analytic framework to examine the processes and mechanisms involved in the formation and experiences of the food environment in the Queensbridge micro-neighborhood in LIC, NY. This is necessary as much of the treatment and discourses around food access do not adequately address power and structure in the formation of food environments. Rather, the narratives frequently applied in food access work marginalize the role and impact of the intersectional nature of food access, utilizing discursive practices that de-politicize the construction of food environments and lead to naturalizing the barriers to access. Food justice works to make race and class linguistically visible and thus integral to understanding the formation of food environments and the policies and practices that address or grow out of these spaces and places.

Food Justice and Unpacking Meaning and Metaphors

Given the complexity of food systems, it is necessary to investigate the various pathways that are involved in how it is formed both spatially and discursively; that is to say the physical and social nature of the food system are equally important. This project grew out of my participation with a community food advocacy group in LIC working towards issues of food and poverty in this neighborhood. Through participating in meetings with community members, I came to see the ways in which power played a central role in their experience of the food environment. Residents came together in this group with a desire to make things better in their food environment recognizing there are many barriers to gaining the kind of access to food they seek. Moreover, contrary to the dominant public health food access literature, challenges to food access in this community exist even though there is a supermarket present in the heart of the Queensbridge Housing Development.

What I came away with from participating in these meetings is that the barriers to accessing healthful and enough food in this community are multiple and deeply entrenched in their experience of poverty. Alkon and Agyemen (2011) argue that "low-income communities and communities of color …are currently, most deeply harmed by the food system" (p4). Given the concentration of poverty defined by the scale of the public housing development that is this community, along with the geo-spatial qualities of the locale, food justice attempts to illuminate the challenges faced by residents in this micro-neighborhood by examining the experience of this food environment.

Speaking with a staff member of the East River Development Alliance reports that the supermarket located in Queensbridge "leaves a lot to be desired;" noting the

regular complaints of clients that prices are too high, food is not fresh, and the staff is not respectful to customers. Here, food justice stands as a critical tool against the competing narratives in public health and food policy that minimize the role of power, particularly in terms of race and class that are implicated in the food environment. Instead, in much of food access literature in the last decade, the trope of "food desert" has been evoked to represent the lack of access. Food deserts denote an environment absent of healthy, affordable and culturally appropriate food that is the foundation of food security. While food desert is an evocative metaphor, in practice it has become synonymous with the absence of supermarkets. Not only this construction of supermarkets as a marker of food security is troubling to me, though. It is the implication that all supermarkets are somehow created equal and the presence of a supermarket in a community is enough to satisfy the conditions of food access. This is clearly not the case for the residents of Queensbridge.

The use of the food desert metaphor continues to dominate both popular and scholarly discourses on food access. In so doing, it is uncritical of the factors that contribute to the formation of food environments that do not distribute the risks and benefits of the food system equally. In this community, residents speak of a store that "stinks so much that [they] run out", of quality that is so poor that one only shops the store if no other choice is possible, and of treatment that is "subhuman" when patrons used food stamps. Yet the term food desert does not adequately describe this place and the experience of resident in their provisioning efforts because in the terms set out in this trope there is a supermarket here, but there is no sense of empowerment among residents in relation to this store. Rather, in this community there is a sense of oppression. One LIC FAB member exclaimed during a meeting: "Shouldn't we decide what we want to eat?" There is a

pervasive concern about food. Many residents have expressed an awareness that there are *lots of health problems* in this community related to the types of food people most often consume here. One member also expresses a concern over the misconception that "African Americans don't eat veggies." In this group, there is awareness that they must fight stereotypes – a pervasive victim-blaming narrative in the larger food and health discourse – as they fight for food access. Therefore, in this case food justice points to the likelihood that the simple presence of a supermarket is not sufficient.

For Queensbridge residents, food is talked about as "very important" and emotions often run high in meetings when people are engaged in reflecting on the conditions of food retail in this community. So while community members have "adapted" to this environment, meaning they know *you have to travel to get quality and affordable food*, this is a condition that is not adequately described by the discourse of food deserts. Furthermore, from a food justice perspective, it is clear that the conditions of the food environment are implicated in the social inequality residents in this low-income community face, which overly burden residents of this micro-neighborhood.

The public health physician Paul Farmer (2004) describes how public health and health outcomes are implicated in social inequality. He explains "an understanding of how such inequalities are embodied as differential risk for infection and, among those already infected, for adverse outcomes including death" (p305). For the residents of the Queensbridge community, the risk of adverse outcomes, including death, center on an inequitable food environment and a community struggling with poverty. For Farmer, these conditions constitute structural violence, which he defines as " violence exerted systematically - that is, indirectly - by everyone who belongs to a certain social order"

(p307). Elements of structural violence include extreme poverty and social marginalization in these settings, which are present in this community, home to the largest public housing development in North America. He continues: "one way of putting it is that the degree to which agency is constrained is correlated inversely, if not always neatly, with the ability to resist marginalization and other forms of oppression" (307). Applying the food justice framework in this study points to the presence of structural violence in this community that, while it is not technically a food desert, its residents are constrained in their agency in relation to the food environment and food access.

Voicing Food (In)Justice

Urban planning scholar, Alfonso Morales, suggests that people who experience food insecurity are victims of food injustice (2011). Food insecurity and hunger are major problems in the Queensbridge community and this is illustrated among my research participants who are regularly dependent on the emergency food system and the federal food safety net programs. In a discussion with a staff member from ERDA, she describes the Queensbridge micro-neighborhood as both “underserved” and unrecognized as such by the city of New York. It is the lack of access, she suggests, that is responsible for the “bad eating habits” she observes in the community. This perhaps sheds light on the ways in which community members discuss their food practices, much of which is deflective when it comes right down to their everyday experiences with food. Here again, I am sensitive the “victim blaming” narrative that is so pervasive around food access and health. Residents are likely in some ways, consciously or not, responding to this narrative as well.

Food justice as a framework for listening to the *food voice* points to the structural violence that underlies these experiences of food. In this study, participants have been more than willing if not eager to criticize the food environment in their micro-neighborhood. It has come through loud and clear that this food environment is perceived as having few resources, with resources that are present having high prices and low quality. It is also easy to hear the frustration in people explaining their encounters with the food environment. What has remained eerily quiet and difficult for me to grapple with is the relative lack of discussion around food at a more personal and everyday level. It may be easy for individuals to point toward exploitative practices in the environment, but much harder to communicate the ways in which the constraints of this environment plays out in everyday life at the level of practice.

In an informal interview with the former manager of the Hour Children Food Pantry, she described the community as *upset about the food system but not empowered to address it in a cohesive way*. This, too, is a reflection of food injustice in this community. In a discussion with a paid trainer for the LIC FAB, he and his colleague described the community members as "old and cold", meaning that the largely senior aged population in this community is difficult to activate for advocacy especially, as they note, in the absence of a history of activism in this community. This lack of cohesion and oldness and coldness are difficult issues for participants to communicate directly but still come through in what is not said. It has been difficult for any interviewee to elicit a meaningful food memory. Most participants do not talk about planning meals and often speak of "others" in the community being reliant on cheap take-away food from the local deli and Chinese restaurant. These observations are not to blame the victim but an effort to begin

to understand the ways in which structural violence has worn away at and operates on community members so accustomed to a an unjust food environment.

Food Justice and Exploring the Possibilities of CSA

In an informal interview with Joel Berg (executive director of NYCCA), he suggested that there is a tension in the food movement particularly around alternative food networks (such as CSA) and those working on hunger and food security. He views foodies (those interested in high quality foods) and hunger advocates as existing on opposite ends of a spectrum in food movement work with NYCCAH attempting to build bridges between them. He observes that people on the political left, such as foodies, are concerned about poverty but far removed from the experience of it. Perhaps this is what motivates NYCCAH to support CSAs such as the Long Island City CSA.

CSAs have the potential to contribute to social and environmental benefits such as bringing fresh locally grown, often organic, produce to communities that lack easy access to such produce. CSAs also promote increased intake of fruits and vegetable, which may lead to improved diet related health outcomes (Cohen et al., 2012). Thus, CSA has the capacity to expand access to fresh produce in underserved food environments and provide a public health benefit. However, in the LIC CSA, I observed a mainly conventional, that is middle to upper middle class population as the majority of the members even though this CSA has as a goal to provide expanded food access to the low-income residents in the community. Perhaps this is because, as Berg explained to me, that the *people who understand issues of hunger and poverty best are those living it* and there are few of them at this alternative food table. A food justice framework identifies the lack of participation by the people affected most in organizing community focused projects to address food

access as one reason why this well intentioned CSA program may not reach more low-income community members and ultimately reproduce this foodie/hunger advocate division.

Food Justice, Public Health and Policy Implications

While there are policy efforts underway in New York City and many other large urban centers that struggle with equitable food access, much of this work relies on neo-liberal solutions to these complex social problems. Paul Farmer suggests that neoliberalism is a central feature of contemporary structural violence explaining:

> "The dominance of a competition-driven market is said to be at the heart of this model, but in truth this ideology is indebted to and helps to replicate inequalities of power. It is an ideology that has little to say about the social and economic inequalities that distort *real* economies and instead, reveals yet another means by which these economies can be further exploited. Neoliberal thought is central to modern development efforts, the goal of which is less to repair poverty and social inequalities than to manage them" (p 313).

Policies and interventions in New York City and New York State use the food desert discourse and associated research produced to inform policy interventions that largely reflect a neoliberal strategy of funding private business to address what is fundamentally a public problem. As Farmer suggests, these policy strategies do little to directly address the problem of poverty that are at the root of structural violence, and in the case of this study, barriers to food access. Instead, market based mechanisms are evoked in a politics of the possible to serve as a steam-valve to the more complex issues related to hunger in low-income communities.

Ultimately, Farmer believes that social inequalities are at the heart of structural violence with racism, classism, and other forms of oppression at its core. Thus, policies

and interventions that appear to assume that everyone is equally mobile or ambulatory, that financial situations remain constant over the course of a given month, and that supermarkets themselves represent quality and affordability are not likely to effectively address the problem of food access in communities that do not neatly fit into a food desert model. NYC food policies such as the FRESH initiative (Food Retail Expansion to Support Health, described in the introduction) that seeks to provide public funds to incentivize the development of supermarkets in communities that are identified as underserved *food deserts* leaves out communities like Queensbridge though they are in need of resources. Rather, perhaps having a more participatory planning process that includes the people Berg suggests have the greatest understanding of hunger and poverty- the poor themselves- would be both a more just and effective approach of meaningfully addressing food access.

Conclusion

Structural violence constricts the agency of vulnerable populations- those without power- and who are most often absent from the policy making table. This project has been highly critical of the metaphor of food deserts noting the awareness of the importance of language as a tool to both understand a phenomenon as well as to direct the efforts toward addressing it. Food access is a complex phenomenon that involves the physical environment, but is equally implicated in the social and cultural environment as well. I have attempted to utilize a food justice framework in order to interrogate these multiple layers of the food environment in the Queensbridge micro-neighborhood. In doing so, I have determined that poverty and the unequal social formation producing this food environment has led to a profound inadequacy in the ability to provide food access

to this marginalized population. In searching for a trope to more adequately describe this food environment in reflecting on the experiences of my participants, I would more likely suggest that of a *food apartheid* wherein the conditions of this food environment oppress a majority of residents that are disenfranchised from the food system and the processes that shape it.

These findings present a complex and troubling food landscape for low-income communities such as Queensbridge. At the same time, food justice appears to have potential to serve as a framework that may shed light on particularly pernicious elements involved in hunger and food insecurity. Thus, food justice and findings from this project point to a number of ways that future work can contribute to addressing the problems of food access in food scholarship and public health policy and practice. This includes utilizing food justice and environmental psychology to examine the affective, cognitive, and physical dimensions of food to better understand the spatial practices and lived experiences of individuals struggling with food access. In addition, this work points to a need for participatory practices in food studies research, public health practice, and policy development. It is my hope that, in the future, I will develop community-based participatory research projects that examine micro and macro level food practices in underserved communities. One such project would include a temporal market basket study to investigate pricing practices at retail sites that have been identified as exploitative. In addition, future work will also include further discursive studies of the linguistic representations of food in academic and policy discourse as well as in popular media. The aim of this work is to continue to untangle the ways in which representation constructs problems and suggests solutions in critical and uncritical ways.

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Appendix

Interview Guide

Community Food Environment:

What are the food choices like your neighborhood?

What do you think about the food outlets (including supermarkets, bodegas/delis, and restaurants) available in your neighborhood?

Do you have any problems in getting food for you and your household? (Cost, distance to food outlets, time, etc).

Food Values and Practices

NOW, I WOULD LIKE TO ASK YOU SOME QUESTIONS ABOUT YOUR FOOD INTERESTS

How important is food to you?

Do you have any concerns related to food? (i.e. health) If YES, What are they?

What kinds of foods do you like to eat?

- How often do you eat them?
- How easy or difficult is it to find them in your neighborhood?

Where do you get your food?

Who does the food shopping for your household?

Where is most of the food shopping done?

Do you or anyone else do meal planning? If YES, What do you (they) do?

Do you or anyone else do the cooking?

- How do you feel about cooking?
- (if respondent cooks) Where or from whom did you learn how to cook?
- What are the kinds of food that are cooked and served at home?
    - Can you give me an example/recipe for a typical dish that is made regularly?
- Is there anything you would like to change about how you cook?
- Can you describe (show) the kitchen?

Do you generally eat at home or eat out often?

Do you typically eat with anyone?/meals together

- What are the food interests/preferences of those you usually eat with?

What kinds of food do you usually eat during a typical week day? And during a typical weekend?

- Is there anything you would like to change about how you regularly eat?
    - Do you feel like there are any challenges to eating the way you would like to eat (i.e. time, access to the types of food you like…)?

Do you eat out at all? If YES, When was the last time you ate out?

- What do you like to eat when you go out?

Are there other sources of food for your household (such as gardens, sharing food with friends and family, emergency food/pantries….)?

Do you ever try to find information about food and health? If so, where do you go to find this information?

Can you describe a significant food memory; good or bad?

Community perceptions and issues

Are people you know in the community concerned about food choices? Why or Why not?

Where do most people get food in the neighborhood?

- How would people describe the food that is available?

Do you know anyone suffering from hunger? OR - Food-related health problems?

How do individuals and the community deal with these problems?

Are you familiar with the term food deserts? What does it mean to you?

Alternative Food Networks

Are you familiar with alternatives such as famers markets, community supported agriculture and coops? If so, what do you think of them?

- Are there any in your community?
- Do you know anyone who uses them? If YES - What do they think about them?