

Searching for Food (Justice): Understanding Access in an Under-served Food Environment in New York City

Christine C. Caruso, *Touro College of Pharmacy*

Abstract

Problems of food access, food insecurity and hunger, are linked to numerous adverse health outcomes as well as highlight social justice problems, such as spatial segregation and neighborhood deprivation, within the larger food system. This project explores the links between food systems, access, and food practices among low-income residents living in the Queensbridge micro-neighborhood located within the larger neighborhood of Long Island City, NYC. 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. These issues are examined through 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 study 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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Introduction

Food is a critical factor in maintaining health and wellbeing, as well as a vital element for quality of life. Yet, access to adequate, appropriate, and healthy food is constrained in many urban communities in the United States, with one in six individuals facing hunger (Feeding America, n.d.). It is estimated that approximately 1.3 million New Yorkers faced hunger during 2010 (City Harvest, n.d). 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, Grummer-Strawn, & Chavez, 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) 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" (p. 378). In addition, Allen (2008) identifies the need to incorporate social justice in food movements and suggests that "[food] justice involves meeting basic human needs, freedom from exploitation and oppression, and access to opportunity and participation" (p.157). 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. 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 in this paper 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.

This paper presents a brief overview of critical issues in food systems research from a food justice perspective. The community-engaged research study discussed in this paper

utilizes a food environments lens to examine the experiences of inequality in an underserved micro-neighborhood through ethnographic methods including participant observation and in-depth qualitative interviews with community stakeholders and residents. This study highlights food systems inequities and seeks to address the ways in which *food desert* as a trope does not adequately describe the experience of living in an underserved food environment. This study also explores how the food desert imagery can serve to silence community members while helping to shape policy and intervention in ways that do not sufficiently meet the needs of community members. Finally this study explores how this trope maintains the status quo, which ultimately undermines the goals of food security and food equity.

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

There is a growing awareness of inequities in food environments (Moreland, Wing, Roux, & Poole, 2002), 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 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. 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, critically examines this notion and attempts to problematize its use as a descriptor of a community’s food environment. Furthermore, the term food desert is problematic for different stakeholders, given the imagery it evokes and the way it erases the structural violence that is involved in creating spatial inequities in the food system.

Supermarkets and Food Access

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, a review by Walker, Keane, and Burke (2010) found that supermarkets may have some adverse effects, including “tempting” consumers to overspend and overindulge in prepared and luxury food items. Moreover, the authors’ findings also suggest that the spread of large supermarkets may drive out small grocers who adequately serve community members (Short, Guthman, & Raskin, 2007). This is problematic because, as Short et al. (2007) point out, independently owned grocery stores tend to be more responsive to the needs of the community and often provide products as a service to residents, even if some of these products (e.g. fresh produce) do not generate sufficient revenues. Findings from the *Seattle Obesity Study* add further complexity to this discussion, with the report noting that a majority of the over 2,000 participants surveyed did not shop at the nearest food stores to their home neighborhoods (Hurvitz, Moudon, Aggarwal, & Drewnowski, 2010). However, it is not clear from this study what factors shaped food store selection decisions. Therefore, Hurvitz et al. (2010) 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 U.S., cities and poor neighborhoods, in particular, have experienced a net loss (Eisenhauer, 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. To counter this unwillingness on the part of corporations to build stores in the highest-need 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 (PFFFI), which focuses on stimulating development of supermarkets in underserved neighborhoods in urban communities in Pennsylvania (Giang, Karpyn, Laurison, Hillier, & Perry, 2008). A campaign and research project conducted by The Food Trust utilized food policy research to increase the number of supermarkets in underserved urban communities in Pennsylvania. A final product of this work was an evidence-based report to be used in an advocacy campaign that culminated in the creation of the PFFFI. 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 initial success of the PFFFI campaign and legislation has spurred similar work in New York City (NYC). In 2008, after the Pennsylvania legislation passed, the NYC 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 (New York City Department 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, a policy that was adopted by the NYC Council in 2009 (New York City Department 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.

Food Justice and Understanding Access

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 is 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 Long Island City (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 Practices and the Food Environment

The research for the current study 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 their 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 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.

Setting

Built in 1939, the Queensbridge Houses is the largest public housing development in North America. Often referred to simply as "Queensbridge", and more colloquially as "the Bridge," this housing development is located in the borough of Queens, in New York City, within the neighborhood of Long Island City (LIC). It houses nearly 7,000 people according to official counts and, because of its scale and density, 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 populated primarily with warehouses, car washes, and auto-parts stores. To the north of Queensbridge is mixed industrial space, including the large Ravenswood Power Plant.

Methods

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 (1992) 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 that her participant's experiences of social isolation, depression, and negative self-image 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 individuals within Hauck-Lawson's study. Through discussing issues of food practices and food access, participants in my study 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, this project outlines how encounters with various aspects of food practice demonstrate neighborhood-level social inequities and structural violence.

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 met¹ 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 of the members of LIC FAB have had direct experience with food insecurity and are actively involved in their communities addressing

¹ In the midst of this study, the LIC FAB lost their meeting space, concurrently lost leadership, and effectively dissolved.

related issues. Through my participation in LIC FAB meetings, I have become interested in the experiences of participants' navigation of their food environments and received their consent to conduct my research project with them.

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. These interviews were conducted with participants of LIC FAB, members of the LIC Community Supported Agriculture 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. Thirteen 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, and participants' homes. Participants' ages ranged from early 20s through 60 years-of-age. A signature of informed consent was obtained from all participants. The majority of participants were African American, while the remainder of the participants included two individuals who identified as White, one as Puerto Rican, and one as Indo-Guyanese. All but three participants were female. In addition, eight staff members and volunteers from the participating CBOs were informally interviewed, including two members of NYC Coalition Against Hunger (NYCCA), 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 were recruited to contribute to this study during participant observation (PO) fieldwork; during these encounters, I extended invitations to participate in individual interviews to all community members who 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. 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. I have conducted PO at regular meetings and events related to the activities of LIC FAB through the fall and winter of 2011. PO 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. It has also assisted me with building relationships among insiders, who then helped me navigate the later stages of my study.

Analysis

Narrative analysis was used to analyze field notes and recorded interviews. According to Chase (2003), narrative analysis incorporates two major principles. First, narration is meant to serve as a means for people to make sense of their experience and to communicate meaning. Second, narrative is also social in character in so far as telling one's story is a relational act. The interviews in this study have utilized this approach and have been analyzed using both top-down and bottom-up coding strategies 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, Schatz, Rosenberg, & Coleman, 2000). This approach was utilized to help identify the most central themes found in the data across participants.

Findings

The findings presented here grow out of the analysis of numerous interactions, observations and discussions of the experience of the food environment in the micro-neighborhood of Queensbridge. Here I will examine, using a food justice framework, how the deeply entrenched inequalities of this community manifest in the encounter with the food environment. While in contemporary food access terminology, this micro-neighborhood is not strictly a food desert, however a grocery gap exists with demonstrated concerns about quality and access to affordable food. The structural violence present in the food environment is further analyzed and discussed through the issues of silencing and power among residents in this community in discussions of food provisioning in Queensbridge. The findings will conclude with a discussion of implications for food policy in low-income urban communities.

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. What is more, 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.

Moreover, I came away from these meetings with a clear sense that the barriers to accessing enough healthful food in this community are multiple and deeply entrenched in their experience of poverty. Alkon and Agyeman (2011) argue that “low-income communities and communities of color . . . are currently, most deeply harmed by the food system” (p. 4). 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 their experiences of this food environment.

Quality

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 to engage community members in discussions around their experiences of the food system here. Overall, participants in this study were dissatisfied with the food environment in and around Queensbridge, which 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 [New

York City Housing Authority] 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. Many members of the community worry about and place particular emphasis on the lack of fresh high quality produce available within the micro-neighborhood. However, fresh vegetables are not the only concern in this community.

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 the 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 it's 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.

I spoke with a staff member of the East River Development Alliance (EDRA), and she reports that the supermarket located in Queensbridge “leaves a lot to be desired.” She noted 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 the 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. Thus, there is an implication that all supermarkets are somehow created equal and that 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.

Access

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, “It’s 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 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 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 people only shop in the store if no other choice is possible, and of treatment that is “subhuman” when patrons use food stamps. Yet, the term food desert does not adequately describe this place and the experience of residents 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 in this community. Many residents have expressed 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 racist and classist 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 that “an understanding of how such inequalities are embodied as differential risk for infection and, among those already infected, for adverse outcomes including death” (p. 305). 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 (2004), these conditions constitute structural violence, which he defines as “violence exerted systematically - that is, indirectly - by everyone who belongs to a certain social order” (p. 307). 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, “[O]ne 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” (p. 307). Applying the food justice framework in this study points to the presence of structural violence in this community, which constrains the agency of residents to change and improve their food environment and food access.

Voicing Food (In)Justice and Silencing the Food-Voice

Urban planning scholar Alfonso Morales (2011) suggests that people who experience food insecurity are victims of food injustice. 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 deflating when it comes right down to their everyday experiences with food. Here, again, I am sensitive to the victim-blaming narrative that is so pervasive around food access and health. Residents are likely, in some ways, to consciously or unconsciously respond to this narrative as well. This problem is clearest when one observes that the issue of food access and the consequences, thereof, are largely framed as nutritional problems rather than evidence of the structural violence inherent in this form of urban poverty and disenfranchisement.

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 their 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 play out in everyday life at the level of practice.

Power

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 the difficulty of changing the “oldness and coldness” within the community are tough issues for participants to communicate directly, but they 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 shared not to blame the victim, but they are used here in an effort to begin to understand the ways in which structural violence has worn away at and operates on community members who have become accustomed to a an unjust food environment.

Conclusion: Food Justice, Public Health, Policy Implications and Undoing Food Apartheid

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 neoliberal solutions to these complex social problems. Paul Farmer (2004) 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 as well as the 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 (2004) 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 deems 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, that seek to provide public funds to incentivize the development of supermarkets in communities that are identified as underserved *food deserts* leave out communities like Queensbridge, though they are in need of resources. Rather, as Berg (personal communication, 2011) suggests, perhaps having a more participatory planning process that includes the people who 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.

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 efforts toward addressing it. While “food desert” is not the only figure of speech used as a shorthand to refer to the complex issues of food access and hunger in the research and advocacy literatures², it continues to dominate contemporary discourse and defines measurement approaches as exemplified by the USDA usage of the term in their work with the Food Access Research Atlas (USDA, n.d.).

Food access is a complex phenomenon that involves the physical environment, but it is equally implicated in the social and cultural environment as well. I have attempted to utilize a food justice framework 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

² For example, Azuma and colleagues use the term “grocery gap” instead of food desert to describe an underserved urban community with limited food access in Los Angeles, CA (Azuma, Gilliland, Vallianatos, & Gottlieb, 2010). Another example of the use of the “grocery gap” is Giang, Karpyn, Laurison, Hillier, & Perry (2008)

to provide food access to this marginalized population. In searching for a trope to more adequately describe this food environment so that it reflects the experiences of my participants, I would suggest the use of a concept I call *food apartheid*, wherein the conditions of the 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.

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