Meanings of “Good Food”
Annotated Presentation

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Interviewer: So what do you typically buy at the grocery store?
Anton: I’m trying to make sure it’s healthy stuff. Well the things that you want to get, it costs more, so by the time I get everything that I know I need for my body, I'm low on food stamps, so I have to figure out how I'm going to eat for the rest of the month. I drink protein shakes and stuff like that because I know my body is low on nutrients, drinks that has fruits in it and vegetables. That costs more, a little bit more money, but it actually lasts me through the day if I drink that or a shake...

Interviewer: Does that help with a meal?
Anton: Yes, it does help a little bit because once you drink the whole thing you are full for a few hours and even like a small snack or something, that will help it.

(Anton, African-American, 22)
What can we take away from Anton’s words?

- He understands the importance of eating fruits and vegetables.
- He knows that eating healthy costs more money.
- He purchases food based on a complex balance between money and nutrition. In other words, he is always asking the question: *What can I buy with my limited resource that will provide me with the most amount of nutrition?*
The “Good Food” Movement in America = “healthy”, “local”, “organic”, “non-processed”, “natural”
The “Food Gap”

- The good food movement is involved in transforming the food system, but this transformation has not been the reality for all people, in particular poor people and people of color (Allen, 1999; 2005)
- We live in the era of a “two-tiered market place”, with “good food” for rich folks and poor quality processed foods for poor people (Winne, 2008)
- Added to that, those who eat “bad food” are blamed and shamed for their food choices (Shugart, 2013)
  - “The dupe class” …ignorant consumers, engaged in mindless consumption
  - “If only they knew”: The unbearable whiteness of alternative food (Guthman, 2008; 2011)
Transforming Food Systems

- Any interrogation of the food system must involve:
  - Including the voices of people experiencing food insecurity.
  - Interrogating the food histories and cultures of marginalized people within a society where whiteness is normalized.
Food Access Means Different Things to Different People*

- Food access for urban and rural communities involves:
  - Full service grocery stores in each neighborhood, SNAP benefits, and good public transport

- Food access for Native American communities involves:
  - Food sovereignty (access to means to grow and produce food independently), land and water rights, and hunting and fishing rights

- Food access for Hmong communities involves access to agricultural land for subsistence and income-generation.

- What does food access mean to Latino communities?

- What does food access mean to African American communities?

- For all communities food shelves and pantries should only be used in case of emergencies (e.g., loss of a job and famine) not for long term and chronic food insecurity (Chilton & Rose, 2009; Allen, 1999)

* See Alkon & Ageyman (2011)
“Good Food” Means Different Things to Different People

- Public health education and promotion programs typically promote a “whitened diet” (quick, convenient, and processed foods that do not smell, spill, or stain) and “white food spaces” (co-ops, health food stores, upscale food markets, and nutrition based diets) (Slocum, 2006, 2007, 2011).

- There is a simultaneous negative framing of non-white foods in particular Latin, Native, and Soul Food (Boero, 2010)
  - Nutritionists categorize the healthfulness of foods based on a variety of factors; most often calories and fat are prioritized over sodium or sugar as a result, people shift from eating eggs or pan dulce for breakfast to processed sugar cereal, which may be lower in calories and fat, but higher in sugar and sodium (Robinson et al, 2014)
  - Fried chicken and fat back collard greens are critiqued for healthfulness using a “white racial frame”. But one cup of collard greens is 11 calories and one cubic inch of fatback is 150 calories, so yes, a serving of fat-back collard greens is not as “unhealthy” as made out to be. It also has the added advantage of being fresh, local, and home-cooked!
What does “good food” mean to people who are food insecure?

60 participants

☐ CHUM food shelf

☐ Ruby’s Pantry (low-cost food pantry)
No “free choice” of foods

People are aware of the importance of nutrition from a scientific perspective, however the amount of money people have impacts the choices they make (see Anton’s quote on the second slide).

They are always looking for how to get more food or more nutrition with less quantity.

Cooking and eating with friends and family is important

Caught between the science of nutrition and deep cultural and historical food traditions

How do I reconcile the cultural traditions of a backyard barbecue or fry-up with friends with the scientific view of nutrition?

Overall, participants argued that food should be … safe, nutritious, balanced, and fresh
Excerpt from our conversation with a food pantry user…

“Nutritious food, if I just go back in time, it's your freshly grown and freshly prepared foods. Everything now comes through a processing plant, so you can only trust that people are making things healthy for us since we've got to go in the store and just pay cash for what we need off the shelf. It's just that trust factor. Nutritious, that's just what I think, fresh foods, like growing your own vegetables, having your own chickens, getting your own eggs fresh out of your own barn. Nutritious, to me, is just country living.” (Michael, African American, 40)
What can we take away from Michael’s words?

- The notion of good food being natural and fresh resonates with Michael.
- He challenges the commercial nature of “good food” or “white food spaces”, which are costly.
- He underscores the importance of trust in the food system. For communities who have suffered ongoing injustice within dominant (white) systems, food sovereignty (or growing and producing your own food) is a often seen as the only trusted solution.

Something to chew on: How are Anton (slide 1) and Michael different in their understandings of good food?
Person Action Steps

- Critical awareness
  - Food access and good food mean different things to different communities (although we typically only hear about “white foods” and “white food spaces” being good.)
  - Cultural traditions present barriers to health, but more often than not there are strengths or “cultural enablers” that can be harnessed for health and wellbeing.
  - The food system is not always trustworthy; in particular for communities of color.
Community Action Steps

- Re-imagine a culture-centered Daniel Plan
  - Consistent with a whitened narrative of food, the Daniel Plan talks about “Faith, Food, Fitness, Focus, and Friends”, but without reference to culture, history, and tradition.
  - So, what would a culture-centered Daniel plan look like?
  - And how do we balance the richness and goodness of culture with the clinical lens of nutritionism?

- How do we use advocacy to transform food systems?
  - For instance, how do we fight for access to communal lands, access to full-service grocery stores, or better bus routes?
The End
References


