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Learning from Practice Stories & Reflective Practice: A Narrative Analysis of Community-based Activism by Community Food System Practitioners

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Abstract: Using narrative inquiry, this paper exemplifies the creation of practice stories, and the reflective practice that is embedded, that gives meaning to the place-based activism of community food system practitioners as a legitimate form of adult education. Implications for understanding and navigating ontological politics in practice are shared.

Purpose and Literature Review

In recent years, an energetic discussion about the social and political roles of food system activism has emerged in public and academic discourses. The nexus of community-based activism and the numerous instances of community food system practice comes together through the work of scholars and practitioners who strive to improve social, economic, environmental, and human health in the wake of globalizing forces that are fueled by neoliberal conditions and policies (Guthman, 2008). The discourses of *sustainable agriculture*, *local food,* and *community food systems* rooted in a North American perspective serves as a rich seedbed for place-based social action to promote equitable and fair access & availability of more locally produced and distributed foods (Feenstra, 2002; Hinrichs, 2003). These initiatives often comprise stakeholder groups and interests that not only reflect a wide range of professional practice and social agendas but emphasize a diversity of racial, gender, and economic relationships that illustrate the complexity of food system politics. One such initiative is the Appalachian Foodshed Project (AFP), which is a community-based research project that aims to address issues of community food security in West Virginia and the Appalachian regions of North Carolina and Virginia. At the heart of this community-based project is the development of a regional coalition to guide and implement strategies to enhance community food security—a condition in which all community residents obtain a safe, culturally acceptable, nutritionally adequate diet that maximizes community self-reliance and social justice (Hamm & Bellows, 2003).

One of the project's aims is to help build community capacity and organizational cohesion for collective impact (Kania, & Kramer, 2011) across the food system in the region. Thus, the AFP hopes to build on the human and natural resources in the region to cultivate resilient food systems and vibrant, healthy communities especially in communities that have been underserved and are economically vulnerable. This work is being addressed through an interdisciplinary food systems research plan, local advocacy, and regional education with communities, farmers, policymakers, non-profits, and institutions to better understand the food system and implement positive changes. In spring 2013, an educational initiative was launched to create and share "practice stories" that illustrate the reflective experiences of community food system educators whose practice is largely rooted in the activist tradition of adult and community education (Foley 1999; Newman, 2006). The impetus for creating a regional narrative of food system activism comes from the practitioners themselves who are eager to create a regional network yet struggle with the formative process of crafting and weaving their stories and actions together. In this

paper, we demonstrate the community-based research process and findings that exemplify the creation and sharing of these practice stories, and the reflective practice that is embedded, that gives specific meaning to the place-based activism of community food system practitioners as a legitimate form of adult education. We specifically point out instances of reflective practice that are significant for the practitioners for understanding and navigating the ontological politics (Law, 2008; Mol, 2002) that guide our everyday practice.

Theoretical Framework

This research brings together three conceptual lineages to illustrate the social and political roles of food system activism as adult educational practice. First, we draw upon the rich tradition of critical adult education to explore the role of political praxis and critical reflection in community-food system activism. This is approached through what Wilson and Hayes (2000) and Brookfield (2000) refer to as developing "critically reflective practice." As used here, critically reflective practice points to a kind of practice that is explicitly attentive to questions of knowledge and power at individual, organizational, and structural levels as a way of focusing our attention on the dynamics of power and interests in our practice (Cervero & Wilson, 2001). We also draw upon the tradition of participatory education to illustrate activist strategies for changing the food system as an educational project (Pretty, 1995; Röling & Wagemakers, 1998; Stevenson, Ruhf, Lezberg, & Clancy, 2003). We also draw upon the cultural politics of food system activism that not only critiques the neoliberal conditions that perpetuate the industrialization of food and agricultural production and processing, but also the way knowledge/power systems which naturalize these conditions, undergird much of the current activist food systems work (Alkon & Agyeman, 2011; Guthman, 2008).

Research Design and Methods

The research approach used in this study of community food system practitioners' experiences in community-based activism relies on stories gathered and analyzed through narrative inquiry methods (Connelly & Clandinin, 2005). We use the definition of "narrative" to mean both a process and product in this particular study's research design and analysis (Richmond, 2002). This includes treating the practice stories as both a *process* of critical reflection through storytelling and the *products* of reflection that help us consider the everyday assumptions and actions that inform educators' practice.

The data were collected through in-depth, qualitative interviews with seven practitioners who participate in the Virginia region of the AFP. We followed action research principles (Greenwood & Levin, 2007) and practitioner profile (PP) framework (Peters, Grégoire, & Hittleman, 2004; Peters & Hittleman, 2003) with the practitioners participating in the research design process. This approach allowed the practitioners to tell their own stories of food system activism in a focused, organized way through a series of critical "prompting" questions designed to emphasize the story of their practice as activists committed to food system change in the region. The in-depth interview process was specifically designed for each practitioner to share: 1) past educational experiences as educators in the community, 2) current instance of "activism as educational practice," and 3) future intentions for community-based activism as educational practice. Each narrative was transcribed, re-transcribed with editing, and examined line by line through a synchronous reading and framing process. The edited stories where then shared with the community food system practitioners for review, responses, and vetting for public use.

Findings

Critically reflective practice was effected and evidenced through the creation and sharing of practice stories. We outline three related concepts that are indicative of this critical reflection that exemplifies the ways in which the practitioners' work is informed by complex power relations that comprise the everyday practice of food system activism (Cervero & Wilson, 2001). These practice stories are therefore examples of varying degrees of reflective practice. These stories are also brief illustrations of the ways in which educators engage in the negotiation of what scholars like Mol (2002) and Law (2008) have termed ontological politics: the politics that govern our perception and performativity of that which is "real," which in turn limits and delimits the ways we see and imagine the possible in everyday social life.

First, the practitioners described a form of "analytic" reflectivity (Brookfield, 2000) across all of the stories through a substantial desire to improve their collaborative processes, as a skill and outcome, when working for greater regional and community food security. Several of the interviewees connected this need for greater collaboration to the greater participation required when working for change related to such a complex social issue (Pretty, 1995). Indeed, because food systems are made up of many smaller systems, long-term change requires the involvement of stakeholders throughout the nested layers (Kania & Kramer, 2011). We specifically heard practitioners reflecting upon the politics of difference and heterogeneity within their collaborative aims. One of the practitioners, Linda, is involved with a non-profit food hub that aggregates produce from local producers and then transports it to large-scale institutional or supermarket distributors. They also provide trainings to their farmer base on a number of food system and food safety topics. The organization had been providing these services to farmers since the mid-1990s, but they had primarily worked with farmers doing organic production. Several years ago, when the organization was having difficulty making the operation work financially, they decided to open their service to conventional farmers as well: "We started working with a conventional grower who was a really big producer and he would grow more for his key buyer than he needed just to make sure he filled that demand." While some might argue that this response to the neoliberal drive for efficiency allowed for the co-optation of the organization's sustainable agricultural mission, the practitioner described a different impact:

> We still are passionate about moving towards more sustainable agriculture, but I also think it has been interesting because we want to get the organic and the conventional buyers in the same room because they have the same issues, and they have the same values. Both sides are guilty of vilifying the other.
>
> […]I talked about conventional agriculture. We wouldn't be having this conversation about broccoli without it. That's conventional broccoli, not organic. But, it's allowing us to then start the conversation of, "Hey let's try no till" and other less, not necessarily organic methods, but you know less painful methods. Not only does that help our farmers, but we need volume in order to make [our food hub operation] work. We won't survive, and we shouldn't survive, if we're only helping a few farmers. So we've reached this tipping point where there's awareness of this opportunity.

The second finding illustrates of form of ideology critique (Brookfield, 2000; Foley 1999) by recognizing a culture of collaboration, which counters the dependency discourse that historically shadows food insecure communities (Hamm & Bellows, 2003). We use the same example from

Linda's organization to illustrate how the practitioners realize the significance of responding to this dependency trap by mobilizing local assets when working in a dominantly rural region like central Appalachia. In noting the need for community reliance, she notes: "We need to bond together because it is so much harder than it would be if we were in a more urban area."

The rural context also adds a degree of urgency to collaborative efforts—a certain level of interdependency is at play. Sarah sums this up by describing how her practice focuses on "creating community" and a developing a "sense of belonging" in rural Appalachia. She goes on to say how challenging this is: "…In a rural county [like ours], that is really tough. People are really well isolated down here. There [are] long driveways, miles away." Another respondent, however, described this urgency and interdependency as an asset in a related manner:

> The first thing that I learned when we first moved here…is that we sit in our own watershed. That kinda turned my thinking around. We don't get water from anybody. Our water is in this county, in kinda a bowl, which runs from this river into the [a bigger river] and down into the Mississippi. So we are responsible, or irresponsible, for the water. So I've had this really wonderful feeling of, we are all connected.

This concept of rural interdependency, even given the relative spatial difference of their urban counterparts, also provides a certain ontological notion of rural as connected. This is compared to seeing rural as distant from power and isolated, a notion that governs food security practice as a function of the dependency discourse (Hamm & Bellows, 2003). To that end, we begin to see here how this practitioner is able to take this instance of ontological destabilization and move it along to create grounds for a new creative possibility in his practice.

The final finding is also related Brookfield's (2000) understanding of ideology critique. Yet this indication of critical reflection focuses on the push and the pull of neoliberalism that undergirds and stirs much tension in food system activism (see Guthman, 2008). For instance, one practitioner works for a community development organization that focuses on enhancing their community's human capacity by way of community gardening and redistributing surplus farm produce to those in their community who were experiencing difficulty accessing food. This organization, which is subsidized by scores of volunteers and the pension of one of the co-founders, stands in contrast to another non-profit organization with a larger geographical reach and longer history of success, both in terms of impact and attaining external grant funding. The participant from the larger organization noted her frustration regarding the time it takes to constantly seek the external funding for their operations—an activity that takes significant time away from working on material food system issues: "One of the things when you work in a non-profit is…the effort it takes to raise money to do the work. I find it disappointing to have to spend so much time focusing on money versus the work." At the same time, the other organization, the smaller non-profit, is growing and is reluctantly beginning to institute instrumental technologies for accounting their work through acts of "scaling up." The hope is that the work is able to live on beyond the primary individuals who are driving the work. But even within this organization, one that primarily operates outside of capitalist norms by practicing what might be defined as a gift economy, the move towards systems of accounting and structuring—technologies of neoliberalism (Mitchell, 2008), is met with considerable reluctance. Larry, whose pension allows him to devote his full-time effort to the programming said: "And so we have to look at, will this organization continue on beyond [my tenure]. And I want it to. So that's [internal funding] kinda providing some foundational work." He goes on to say:

I find that to be the most difficult work so far with [our organization]. I just don't like it! You know working on the mission statement, working on the organizational structure, working on job descriptions... You know, I mean, ugh. Just send me out to a garden, to take some produce out to somebody. But we got to do that work, too.

Although brief, these instances of critical reflection help us see tension between the more market-based activist approaches and those that employ less market-related strategies. The former struggle to increase their impact due to the amount of time consumed by managing, seeking, and accounting for funding, while the latter organization, the smaller counterpart, one that has primarily worked outside of the mainstream system, reluctantly seeks to adopt a more market-friendly operation in hopes of increasing their impact and sustainability. This tension, particularly when embedded in the previous two findings, gives particular meaning to the political complexities these educators perform within. These stories of practice thus provide glimpses of ideological positions and strategies both familiar and foreign to one another. From on ontological position, this tension begins to offer us new a way to engage with these complexities. For example, these practice stories may help us more adeptly recognize and challenge the polemics of being for or against the governing notions of neoliberalism and of the activism necessary to move toward greater community food security—breaking down unnecessary binaries and evoking new possibilities for action.

Implications for Adult education Theory and Practice

Peters, Grégoire, & Hittleman (2004) argue that stories have an ability to engage individuals in a way that humanizes problems and actors and creates the groundwork for new educational possibilities. As we have analyzed the narratives and rewoven them through the authors' words, we have collectively built a platform for a critical engagement with community food security work as a legitimate form of adult education by both illustrating and engendering critical reflection in their every-day practice. Although none of the practitioners claimed to be explicitly engaging in critical reflection, perhaps due to the complexity inherent in attempting to address a social issue like food security, critical reflection was effected and evidenced through the creation of their stories. The political challenges of engaging in food system activism are also clear in these stories through an analysis of reflective practice: learning for collaboration, overcoming the legacy of food insecurity as dependency, and negotiating the discursive governance of marketization in professional practice. The act of storytelling, however, may prove productive to move the work forward in generative ways. When facing a complex problem like food insecurity, "seeing" the system better means understanding a plurality of perspectives on the issue and ways to engage with it (Brookfield & Holst, 2010).

From an ontological perspective, these findings are important for educators. When critical reflection destabilizes a putative reality, we see a role for educators in the negotiation of what Mol (2002) and Law (2008) have termed ontological politics. That is, people's realities and conceptions are different as a result of their different histories, experiences, cultures, roles, etc. We argue that engaging in "ontological politics" helps us better understand "what is" or "what could be made more real" in our social lives (Law & Urry, 2004, p. 396). This concept is therefore offered as a valuable and useful conception to be embedded in our educational practices. For adult educators, this means nurturing spaces for ontological dialogue that is

embedded in daily practice. In doing so, we can help realize and unsettle certain ontological fixities we find ourselves in and open doors for new conversations and just possibilities.

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