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Increasing access to healthy food at a cooperative grocery store

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Increasing access to healthy food at a cooperative grocery store

by

Jessica Lynne Soulis

A thesis submitted to the graduate faculty
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
MASTER OF SCIENCE

Co-majors: Sociology; Sustainable Agriculture

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Ames, Iowa

2012

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Abstract

A variety of approaches, including public and private food assistance and community-based models, are being used to address food insecurity. In this participatory project, I worked with representatives of a grocery cooperative and interviewed social services staff and low-income residents from the surrounding community in order to develop programming and policy suggestions for the co-op that could make it more inclusive and affordable, thereby helping to increase community members' food security. In the process, I learned a great deal about the challenges faced by people with low incomes, their resourcefulness, the values that shape the people and organizations included in this study, and the ways that knowledge and power influence the lives of the interviewees. These individual responses lead to structural questions about the food system, especially concerning how people with low incomes experience it. This project demonstrates that social change agents ought to continually reflect upon the values and assumptions that guide their work to persist in making their approaches more just, and that social change is best instigated and carried out from within a community and sustained as part of a larger movement to improve the system and the lives of those most adversely affected by it.

Chapter 1. Introduction

Scanlan (2009:308) describes a “sociological imperative that embodies a need for doing what it takes to create a more just world” and calls for sociologists to not merely study food insecurity, but to work for change in the classroom, in their research, and to take action in the world outside the academy. This participatory action project strives to meet this sociological imperative by not merely examining food insecurity in West Des Moines, Iowa, but also by working with a newly opened cooperative grocery store and the human services office of the City of West Des Moines to increase the food security of low-income community members.

Food security and community-based food organizations

In recent years, an increase in levels of food insecurity in the United States has created a need for investigations into the nuances of addressing this problem (Andreatta, Rhyne, and Dery 2008; Barrett 2010; Berner, Ozer, and Paynter 2008; Carney 2012; Coleman-Jensen et al. 2011; Nnakwe 2008). There have been a number of interventions explored for addressing food insecurity, including public and private food assistance (Berner and O’Brien 2004; Berner et al. 2008; Daponte, Haviland, and Kadane 2004; Herman et al. 2008; Huffman and Jensen 2008; Kropf et al. 2007; MovetheFood Initiative 2010, 2011) and community-based food organizations and interventions (Allen 1999; Flora and Gillespie 2009; Smith and Morton 2009; Story et al. 2008; Tagtow et al. 2011; Tagtow and Roberts 2011). While food assistance programs are crucial to ensure food security for the entire population, community-based approaches can work in concert with these programs

to better address food insecurity and health issues within their context (Smith and Morton 2009; Story et al. 2008; Tagtow et al. 2011).

One type of community-based project is a grocery cooperative, where people purchase a membership and become member-owners of the cooperative, which entitles them to have a voice in the decision-making process of the co-op. Member benefits vary, as do specific policies, but in general, cooperatives adhere to principles such as democratic member control, autonomy and independence, and concern for the community (Tallgrass Grocery Coop 2012). While some research has been conducted about cooperatives and their relationships to their communities (Hibbert, Piacentini, and Al Dajani 2003; Morland 2010; Jennifer Lynn Wilkins 1996; Winne 2008), there is a need for more research in this area. Winne (2008) and Morland (2010) examined co-ops in relation to the low-income communities in which they were located; however, both of these pieces were written after the co-ops had closed. This research project examines the relationship between a recently opened cooperative grocery store and the community in which it is located¹.

Objective of this study

This project aims to address the following research questions:

- How can a grocery cooperative create a welcoming atmosphere for local low-income community members, both to shop in the store and to be involved in the organization? How can this cooperative become a more affordable alternative for these community members?

¹ Tallgrass Grocery Co-op closed during the period of time between my original writing and defense of this thesis and when I made my final revisions. Appendix 3 describes this closing in more detail.

- Can these efforts be considered an attempt to move toward food sovereignty?

Answers to these questions come from my interviews with low-income community members and staff at West Des Moines Human Services who work closely with the low-income population, as well as from notes and observations from my participation with the Board of Directors and Membership and Marketing Committee of Tallgrass Grocery Co-op. Tallgrass focuses on providing healthy and locally grown food to its members and other residents of the Des Moines area. One of the objectives of this study is to increase food security and access to healthy food for low-income residents of West Des Moines. While creating an environment at the co-op that is welcoming to low-income residents will not automatically lead to increased access, I believe it is a necessary component of increasing access. Since the co-op is new and differs from a typical grocery store, I believe it is important that low-income community members be made to feel comfortable and welcomed when they go to the co-op, or many of them will not consider shopping there, regardless of how much healthy food they could access. Additionally, because members of co-ops are also the owners of the co-op and take part in its decision-making process, this study aims to build co-op membership within the low-income community, giving them more of an opportunity to have their voices included in decisions regarding their food system.

The discussions I had with community members provided much insight into the lived experiences of people with low incomes in relation to food. These personal experiences point to structural questions about the food system. For example, in what ways does the food system replicate and even exacerbate the inequality that

exists within the society of the United States? When people with low incomes bear a disproportionate share of the negative outcomes of the food system, how can we deal with this in a way that leads to a more, rather than an ever less, just food system?

An analysis of the findings of this study and my role in it includes an examination of this project through a food sovereignty frame. Food sovereignty is a concept that developed out of La Vía Campesina, the movement of small scale and peasant farmers in the Global South to declare their rights to autonomy in decision-making about the food they grow and the way it is grown, and includes a declaration that food is a human right (Vía Campesina 1996 as cited in Desmarais 2002; Menezes 2001; Patel 2009). While originally and typically applied to movements in the Global South (Desmarais 2002; Holt-Giménez 2009; Menezes 2001; Naranjo 2012), researchers and activists have recently begun exploring what food sovereignty might mean and how it would look in the context of food movements in the United States (Anderson and Bellows 2012; Holt-Giménez and Wang 2011; Schiavoni 2009).

Definitions

Some of the terms I use in this paper have a number of definitions, and so in order to be clear, I will include the definitions or explanations of these terms here. “Low income” is by nature a relative term. While the federal poverty line is clearly defined, with eligibility for many types of assistance determined by a comparison of this amount to household income, some definitions categorize anything below the

average income as low income. For this project, I considered anyone who sought any type of assistance from West Des Moines Human Services (WDMHS), including from the onsite food pantry, to have a low income and therefore to be appropriate for inclusion in the study. WDMHS, like many social service agencies, uses income guidelines to determine eligibility for its services, while DMARC, the organization that coordinates the food pantries, does not. When considering who I am talking about when I use the term “low-income community members,” I am less concerned about what could be considered an arbitrary number and more concerned about the constraints created by not having enough money, whatever “enough” looks like for a specific household.

There are also a variety of definitions for the term “healthy food,” and when I use the term in this paper, it is with the following definition, from the website of the Access to Healthy Foods Coalition (2010), in mind:

A healthy food is a plant or animal product that provides essential nutrients and energy to sustain growth, health and life while satiating hunger. Healthy foods are usually fresh or minimally processed foods, naturally dense in nutrients, that when eaten in moderation and in combination with other foods, sustain growth, repair and maintain vital processes, promote longevity, reduce disease, and strengthen and maintain the body and its functions. Healthy foods do not contain ingredients that contribute to disease or impede recovery when consumed at normal levels.

This definition allows for inclusion of processed foods like vegetables and fruits that are canned or frozen, as long as the processing does not decrease the nutritional value of the foods or add harmful ingredients. Because of the multitude of definitions and conceptions of this term that exist, the women I interviewed may have meant something else when they said “healthy food.”

Finally, “Global South” is a term applied to the poorer countries of the world, many but not all of which are located in the Southern Hemisphere. As Patel (2007:321) states, this term is “much to be preferred to ‘Third World’ or to the depoliticized ‘developing countries’, and certainly better than the increasingly out of date division of the world into ‘the West’ and everyone else.”

Structure of the thesis

This thesis is divided into five chapters. Following this introduction is the literature review chapter, where a discussion of studies on food security and health in the United States provides background information on these larger issues. Included is an exploration of access to and affordability of healthy food, as well as food assistance as a response to food insecurity. I then discuss the role of community-based food organizations in addressing food insecurity, including the values that inform this work, followed by a discussion of food cooperatives as a category of community-based food organizations. The literature review concludes with an investigation into the application of the concept of food sovereignty to food movements in the United States. The research methods chapter details the steps taken in the process of conducting this project. In the results and discussion chapter, I share my findings and my analysis of those findings in terms of the themes discovered during qualitative analysis and how this relates to the existing literature, and explore whether this project can be considered to be a part of the food sovereignty movement in the United States. The conclusion chapter discusses my major findings, including what will be reported back to Tallgrass Grocery

Cooperative and West Des Moines Human Services, as well as limitations of this study, suggestions for future research, and my final thoughts about the project.

Chapter 2. Literature Review

In order to situate this project, it is important to explore food security in the United States and its relation to health, including access to healthy food and food assistance as an intervention for food insecurity. After exploring these topics, this chapter continues with a discussion of the role of community based food organizations in addressing community food security, including the values that inform the actions and goals of these organizations, followed by a consideration of food cooperatives. Because one of my research questions asks if efforts to involve local low-income community members in a grocery cooperative can be considered a part of the food sovereignty movement, this review concludes with a discussion of the food sovereignty movement and its growth in the United States.

Food security and health

There has been extensive research conducted on food security and health, as the interactions of the two are explored and the importance of these interactions for society is further realized. Information about food insecurity will depend on which tools are used to measure it, which facet of food insecurity – access, availability, or utilization – is being measured, and which level – individual, household, community or national – is being considered (Barrett 2010).

The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA 2009) defines household food security in the following way:

Food security for a household means access by all members at all times to enough food for an active, healthy life. Food security includes at a minimum: the ready availability of nutritionally adequate and safe foods [and] assured

ability to acquire acceptable foods in socially acceptable ways (that is, without resorting to emergency food supplies, scavenging, stealing, or other coping strategies).

In the USDA's most recent report on household food security rates in the United States, the national average was 14.5%, with higher food insecurity rates for single parent households (35.1% if headed by a woman or 25.4% if headed by a man), "other households with children in complex living arrangements" (20.8%), any household with children (20.2%), Black households (25.1%), Hispanic households (26.2%), and household with incomes below 185% of the poverty threshold (33.8%) (Coleman-Jensen et al. 2011:10). Carney's (2012:185) research, which consisted of surveying 150 households and observing and conducting unstructured interviews at food outlets in three low-income communities, revealed high levels of food insecurity and use of a variety of coping strategies, such as food assistance, attaining food from multiple sources, and "revitalization of the home as a site of domestic food production and preparation."

Nnakwe's (2008) findings based on interviews of 236 heads of household receiving food assistance at a variety of sites introduce a perhaps counterintuitive idea: that as level of education goes up for these interviewees, food insecurity increases. This is because the individual's income is too high to qualify for various benefits but not high enough to maintain food security (Nnakwe 2008), which is in accord with other studies that found the number of working poor who are food insecure is large and growing (Andreatta et al. 2008; Berner et al. 2008). Barrett (2010:827) notes that most food insecurity is associated with chronic poverty rather than with a catastrophe.

To define community food security, Hamm and Bellows (2003:37) proposed, “Community food security (CFS) is defined as a situation in which all community residents obtain a safe, culturally acceptable, nutritionally adequate diet through a sustainable food system that maximizes community self-reliance and social justice,” and though definitions differ from this somewhat, there is general agreement about how to define this concept (Gregory and Gregory 2010; Holt-Giménez and Wang 2011; McCullum et al. 2005; Short, Guthman, and Raskin 2007). However, Gregory and Gregory (2010:103) critique the definitions of community food security because they lack standards or measures for success and therefore do little to aid in the creation or evaluation of different models.

Healthy food access and barriers

There has been a large volume of research conducted concerning access to healthy food and barriers to that access, with some of this research lending weight to the argument that many low-income populations do lack access to healthy food. Freedman and Bell (2009) compared perceptions of access to healthy food of a food insecure population to the “reality” of the environment and found these participants were able to accurately perceive the amount of access they had to healthy food. Topolski, Boyd-Bowman, and Ferguson (2003) found that fruits purchased at stores of two supermarket chains located in neighborhoods with low socioeconomic status (SES) were consistently rated as appearing and tasting less fresh than those purchased at stores of the same chains in high SES neighborhoods. Zenk et al. (2005) found that among impoverished neighborhoods, those in which African

Americans lived were located further from supermarkets than those in which Whites lived, though in the more affluent neighborhoods, there was not a similar disparity along racial lines, indicating that race and class intersect to influence access to healthy food.

An area of controversy in the research is whether healthy food is more expensive than less healthy food. The Thrifty Food Plan (TFP) was created by the USDA to serve as a tool for calculating how much money is needed to acquire food that meets all nutrition recommendations, provided that the food is purchased at a store, and it was also used to calculate the maximum amount of Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, formerly the Food Stamp Program) benefits for which people can qualify (Stewart et al. 2011). A study based on 2008 food prices and the TFP showed that low-income individuals could afford to purchase the number of servings of fruit and vegetables recommended by the MyPyramid guidelines if they were to purchase some of the lower cost items (Stewart et al. 2011). However, a number of studies (Drewnowski and Darmon 2005; Monsivais, Mclain, and Drewnowski 2010) have established that energy-dense diets are less expensive than are nutrient-dense diets and this disparity is rising, and furthermore Drewnowski and Darmon (2005) assert that purchasing these energy-dense, less expensive foods is a rational choice for people with low incomes.

Carlson and Frazão (2012) argue that comparing the cost of foods based on cost of food energy is only one means of comparison, and if the prices being compared are measured in the price of edible weight or the price of average portion, fruits, vegetables, dairy items, and grains are less expensive than are protein

sources (in this study, protein sources include meat, poultry, eggs, seafood, nuts, seeds, and soy products) and unhealthy foods (defined by the authors as those with added sugars and/or sodium and those high in saturated fat). They also point out that it costs more to meet the USDA's dietary recommendations for protein and vegetables than it does for fruits, grains, and dairy (Carlson and Frazão 2012).

Several studies have investigated factors that influence low-income consumers' food choices to determine if cost and lack of access are the largest barriers to healthy food consumption (Dibsdall et al. 2003; Eikenberry and Smith 2004; Herrera, Khanna, and Davis 2009; Lucan, Barg, and Long 2010; Wiig and Smith 2009). While Dibsdall et al. (2003) found that more complex motivational, psychosocial, or lifestyle factors were the biggest barriers to eating healthy food, Herrera et al. (2009), in their metaanalysis of 13 studies, found affordability to have the heaviest influence on where low-income consumers purchase food. Other studies reported that cost and finances, in addition to factors such as convenience, taste, preference, transportation, and lack of discipline, were indeed barriers to eating healthy food (Eikenberry and Smith 2004; Lucan et al. 2010; Wiig and Smith 2009). These studies also looked at motivations for and promoters of eating healthy food and found that living longer, feeling better, and overall health concerns were the biggest motivators, while gardens, family members and friends, and food stamps and food pantries were the most influential promoters of healthy eating (Eikenberry and Smith 2004; Lucan et al. 2010).

Food assistance as intervention

There are many public and private forms of food assistance available to help meet the needs of food insecure populations. The public forms include such programs as SNAP, school feeding programs, the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) and the Farmers' Market Nutrition Programs (FMNP), while private food assistance takes the form of food pantries, soup kitchens and other food provisioning outlets. Allen (1999:126) insists that, though efforts in the community food security movement are important, they “cannot be a substitute for basic food programs that provide regular food access, especially for the most vulnerable populations.”

Daponte et al. (2004) found that households receiving a high amount of food stamp benefits are more likely to be able to obtain at least the Thrifty Food Plan than are households that receive a low amount of food stamps, those that receive only WIC benefits, or those only receiving private assistance from food pantries. However, Huffman and Jensen (2008) did not find evidence that food insecurity is reduced for those who receive food assistance. Even though food assistance is helpful in acquiring healthy food, it does not necessarily make households more food secure, a finding corroborated by The Des Moines Area Religious Council's (DMARC) *MoveTheFood* Initiative in their conclusion that receipt of food assistance benefits does not guarantee food security, with many people they serve reporting that they run out of food before receiving the next month's benefits (MovetheFood Initiative 2010, 2011).

Kropf et al. (2007) also found that those who participated in the WIC Farmers' Market Nutrition Program showed more indicators of a healthful diet than did participants in WIC alone, but this participation did not increase their level of food security. Herman et al. (2008) showed that people who received coupons to purchase fruit and vegetables at farmers' markets or at supermarkets increased their consumption of these foods and sustained this increase six months after vouchers ended, with this trend being more pronounced for those receiving farmers' market coupons. Additionally, Berner and O'Brien (2004) found that demand for emergency food services such as food pantries had increased during the same time that public food assistance was decreasing, and they suggest that this may exemplify a trend of greater privatization of the responsibility for reducing food insecurity. Berner et al. (2008) reported that long-term food assistance is often needed for those working and for those accessing benefits, and the authors call for an increase in food assistance.

Community-based food organizations and food security

A great deal of research has been conducted on ways to address food insecurity. In addition to the public and private food assistance discussed above, many propose a more community-based, ecological or systems approach (Allen 1999; Flora and Gillespie 2009; Robinson 2008; Smith and Morton 2009; Story et al. 2008; Tagtow et al. 2011; Tagtow and Roberts 2011). According to Hamm (2009:244), "A community-based approach implies that there are networks of people and institutions within the community that are helping to insure that everyone in their

community is food secure and that resources are stewarded for both present and future generations.” Robinson (2008) recommends using a socio-ecological model to examine the interactions between factors at the intrapersonal, interpersonal, organizational, community, and public policy levels that affect food accessibility, availability, and utilization in order to more holistically understand food security and health and to propose meaningful interventions. This corresponds with the assertions of others that individual behavior change must be considered in the context of the environment – built, social, and cultural – that influences the individual and must be addressed through improvements to the environment as well as policy interventions (Smith and Morton 2009; Story et al. 2008; Tagtow et al. 2011). Similarly, Flora and Gillespie (2009) suggest using a community capitals approach to better understand all of the assets and opportunities of a community in relation to increasing access to healthier foods as well as recreation opportunities, and in order to decide where best to invest resources for further interventions.

There are many examples of community-based food organizations that have embraced these approaches to varying degrees. Herrera et al. (2009) describe the HOPE Collaborative, a group of community food and public health organizations that employed participatory action research, and the authors also detail the structure necessary to do this type of work, emphasizing collaboration, trust, community outreach and engagement, participatory action research, and intentional involvement of and willingness to share power with community resident stakeholders. Macias (2008:1098) assessed the impacts, in terms of the qualities of inclusion, access, and experiential knowledge of the natural world, of Community Supported Agricultural

enterprises (CSAs), direct market farms, and community gardens at the Intervale Center and asserts, "The risk here is to assume that these qualities will emerge naturally if human communities are simply reoriented toward the importance of local agriculture." He argues for innovations that directly integrate low-income community members into the social transactions of these local endeavors and that in order to bring about true change, people who are negatively impacted the most by inequality must be a part of the movements (Macias 2008). Andreatta et al. (2008) investigated a program offering free CSA shares to low-income households, finding positive impact on produce consumption, purchasing, and knowledge, but this program did not "solve" the problem of food insecurity, nor was this necessarily a replicable, sustainable model due to the large number of volunteers involved and the outside funding necessary. Young et al. (2011) assert that farmers' markets can help increase community food security for low-income communities and discussed factors relating to the community, physical, retail and regulatory environment that contribute to the success of farmers' markets in low-income areas. Guthman, Morris, and Allen (2006) discuss both the difficulties inherent in using alternative agrifood institutions such as CSAs and farmers' markets to confront food insecurity and the potential for these types of institutions, particularly in concert with more robust public entitlement programs, to contribute to increased food security.

Values of community-based food organizations

It is important to examine the values that inform organizations involved in community food movements in order to better understand how they work and how

they relate to low-income community members. As Gregory and Gregory (2010) point out, many of these organizations and movements are composed of disparate voices that may be working counter to one another, but without clarifying the values that inform these voices and linking them to action, progress for the alternative agrifood movement is unlikely. Allen (1999, 2010) is particularly critical of the idea that localized food systems will, by nature, be socially just, inclusive of marginalized groups, or capable of solving significant problems, when in fact they may tend to serve the privileged and focus on local problems without further contextualizing the causes or solutions of those problems. Andreatta et al. (2008) found that social networks centered around food are able to both foster a sense of community between low-income community members and farmers and reach a great variety of people, though this is not always the case, as many assumptions built into local food systems do not take into account the challenges faced by low-income residents, such as transportation and work schedule issues. Some of the farmers included in the study by Andreatta et al. (2008) expressed concerns about being in similar financial situations as the low-income CSA members and believed that the members ought to embrace some of their values with respect to food and farming.

Duffy et al. (2006:503) surveyed food pantry directors in Alabama and Mississippi and used this data to explore “the demographic and ideological distance between” the directors and food insecure people in the area. The attitudes of the food pantry directors toward their clients were either as judgmental as or less judgmental than the clients’ attitudes toward themselves, and most of them attributed poverty to structural causes, though many believed that pantry clients

were not always honest about their needs, and a few expressed the belief that many of the people using the pantry should be working (Duffy et al. 2006).

Unlike inhabitants of some countries, people from North America may struggle to understand and express their values concerning food because they do not often engage in discussions of this nature (Gregory and Gregory 2010). The research discussed here illustrates that there is still much to explore in terms of the organizational and personal values that inform the work of community-based food organizations, and this research might be helpful for those who struggle to articulate their values.

Food cooperatives

Much research has investigated the ability of neighborhood, corner, and smaller food stores to provide adequate access to healthy food (Bodor et al. 2008; Bolen and Hecht 2003; Jetter and Cassady 2006; Short et al. 2007). Often, many foods, especially produce and healthier varieties of some items (e.g. whole-wheat pastas or breads) are unavailable in these smaller stores (Bodor et al. 2008; Jetter and Cassady 2006). As Allen (1999:125) points out, “The idea of efficiently getting everything in the same place is what gave rise to the supermarket in the first place.” Short et al. (2007) assert that small stores sometimes address food security, but they are not always as affordable as larger stores, often cater to specific segments of the population, and are not evenly distributed in cities, though Bolen and Hecht (2003) found that converting traditional corner stores to neighborhood grocery stores that offer healthy food is a promising model.

There has not been much research conducted specifically about food cooperatives or their role in increasing community food security. Wilkins (1996) compared attitudes of members of a food cooperative to those of nonmembers and found the co-op members were more committed to buying local and seasonal foods. Hibbert et al. (2003) conducted a project researching the motivations and experiences of volunteers in a community-based food cooperative located in a low-income area in Scotland and found that people became involved because they wanted to do something helpful, meet and work with new people, or due to an interest in issues concerning food. The authors found that these were also reasons volunteers stayed involved, but in addition, they were able to develop skills, had an enjoyable experience due to the organization and operation of the co-op, and experienced self-empowerment (Hibbert et al. 2003).

Morland (2010) describes the challenges of operating a food cooperative that was created as part of a community-based participatory research project in East New York, a predominately African-American, low-income community. These challenges, which led to the closing of the co-op two years after it opened, included starting in too large of a space, inconsistent stock, lack of leadership resulting from changing partners and personnel, problems with setting prices, not connecting with the community, and overall lack of experience in running a grocery store (Morland 2010). Winne (2008) also relates the story of a co-op that was opened in a food desert in Hartford to address lack of access to healthy food and closed a year and a half later due to some of the same issues raised by Morland (2010), and he cites other examples of food co-ops that have met a similar fate. While there are lessons

to be learned from the experiences of these particular co-ops, they differ from many community based food organizations, both for-profit businesses and nonprofits, that view addressing lack of access to healthy food for the local low-income community as only one of multiple objectives. It is thus valuable to investigate how a food cooperative not established solely for the purpose of meeting the food access needs of a low-income community can work to foster a relationship with low-income community members.

Food sovereignty

The concept of food sovereignty grew out of the mobilization and organization of the international peasant and farmer movement, La Vía Campesina, in response to the increasing globalization, industrialization, and commodification of food and food systems (Menezes 2001). Early on, Vía Campesina (1996 as cited in Desmarais 2002:104) defined food sovereignty in this way:

Food is a basic human right. This right can only be realized in a system where food sovereignty is guaranteed. Food sovereignty is the right of each nation to maintain and develop its own capacity to produce its basic foods respecting cultural and productive diversity. We have the right to produce our own food in our own territory. Food sovereignty is a precondition to genuine food security.

Definitions of food sovereignty have evolved and proliferated over time, but they typically include considerations of power in the food system and the right to autonomy in decisions regarding resources, technology, and values (Desmarais 2002; Patel 2009; Vía Campesina 2011). Some authors have pointed out that though food sovereignty is necessary in order for “genuine” food security to exist, in and of itself, it does not guarantee food security (Desmarais 2002; Menezes 2001),

and Beuchelt and Virchow (2012) discuss this in the context of other challenges and issues with the concept, such as a lack of agreement about who is included, who is the target group of the movement, and how to create global food sovereignty policy. Allen and Wilson (2008:538) argue that local food and other alternative agrifood movements in the United States do not address inequality directly in the same way as do efforts such as La Vía Campesina, but they also point out the potential of the local food movement to be liberatory by “build[ing] a different world and resist[ing] neoliberalization” and serving as a venue for “discursive and cognitive change and engagement.”

Although the bulk of the research on food sovereignty and the use of the concept itself have generally referred to movements in the Global South (Desmarais 2002; Holt-Giménez 2009; Menezes 2001; Naranjo 2012), a food sovereignty movement is also growing in the United States, with some proponents of alternative agrifood movements, family farm groups, including the National Family Farm Coalition, and some in the food justice movement embracing the principles of food sovereignty in their work (Anderson and Bellows 2012; Holt-Giménez and Wang 2011; Schiavoni 2009). Holt-Giménez and Wang (2011:90) describe the aims of this movement as “to dismantle global markets and the monopoly power of corporations at local, national, and international scales, and [to advocate] redistributing and protecting productive assets such as seeds, water, land, and processing and distribution facilities.” Ayres and Bosia (2011:49) considered two examples carried out by farmers, one in France and one in Vermont, that illustrate “localism as a means of rearticulating an effective while diffuse platform of resistance to global

capitalism evident in agribusiness” as well as “how the concept of food sovereignty is realized and resonates in local practices employed strategically and everyday to reject or secede from the global agribusiness model.” The authors explain how the concept has been appropriated and diffused through affiliation with the international food sovereignty movement and then used to frame local issues and inform “microresistance” (Ayres and Bosia 2011).

Carney (2012) suggests more directly and explicitly linking efforts at the localization of control on the production side of food systems to the food insecure populations that are most negatively impacted by the current food system model, while Alkon and Mares (2012) argue that to be considered efforts toward food sovereignty, these types of projects must frame themselves as being directly opposed to the dominant model and its neoliberal underpinnings. Fairbairn (2012) describes the need to reframe food sovereignty as being oppositional to the hegemony of the industrial model and its accompanying inequities, and that this movement could be complementary to alternative agrifood efforts. In a study regarding food access and food activism in Chicago, Block et al. (2012) found many commonalities between the small-scale farmers and peasants of *Vía Campesina* and the food insecure residents living there, with concerns over power, respect, and control of resource use paramount to activist efforts. It is clear there is still much research to be done about the application of a food sovereignty frame to efforts at increasing autonomy and equity in the United States, including this project, which investigates the relationship between a grocery cooperative and low-income residents of the community in which it is located.

In this chapter, I have explored the concepts of food security and health, community-based food organizations and food security, food cooperatives, and food sovereignty in order to situate this study within the existing body of literature. In the next chapter, I will describe the research process, including the methods I used, the research setting, and the methodology that guided this project. A discussion of my findings and an analysis of the data I gathered, considering the above concepts and the framework of food sovereignty, will follow.

Chapter 3. Research Methods

In this chapter I describe the process I undertook in order to conduct this research project. I discuss my project as a case study of the relationship between a cooperative grocery and low-income members of the surrounding community. I then give background information about Tallgrass Grocery Co-op and West Des Moines Human Services, the two organizations with which I worked. The methodology I used for this study was participatory action research, and I conducted in-depth interviews to gather most of my data, and the next part of this chapter details these aspects of my research. I then explain my processes of analyzing the data, establishing validity, and maintaining the confidentiality of those involved in the project, and I close the chapter with a discussion of the ethics of this project.

Case study of the relationship between a cooperative grocery and low-income members of the surrounding community

This research project is a case study of the newly forming relationship between a cooperative grocery and low-income members of the community in which it is situated. Because I wanted to thoroughly explore multiple facets of this relationship, its context, and its development over the course of many months, a case study is an appropriate form of research (Neuman 2006:40). Though multiple-case designs are sometimes seen as more sound than are single-case designs, there are several circumstances that warrant single-case designs, one of which is the revelatory case (Yin 2003).

According to Yin (2003:42), a revelatory case “exists when an investigator has an opportunity to observe and analyze a phenomenon previously inaccessible to scientific investigation.” Tallgrass Grocery had not yet opened when I began my involvement with this project; therefore this case differs from one in which an already established grocery co-op or natural food store endeavors to form a relationship with the low-income members of its community. The development and evolution of the co-op and its values, including its relationship to its low-income neighbors, are not unique phenomena, as similar organizations have all gone through similar processes. However, the opportunity to observe and analyze these processes as they take place is a unique one, especially since the early meetings I attended and conversations I had with steering committee members and volunteers from the co-op all indicated that those involved were committed to creating an environment that would be inclusive of all local neighborhood residents.

There are criticisms about the case study as a scientific research method; however, many of these reflect a misunderstanding of case studies. One such criticism is that the knowledge discovered in a case study is context-specific, yet when viewed another way, this is actually a strength of the method. Flyvbjerg (2006) argues that indeed it is this context-specific learning that moves the learner from beginning to higher-level thinking. In order to truly understand systems or complex relationships, the context must be considered, and because knowledge will be applied in a specific context, it is better understood in that context as well. Additionally, if research is recognized as “a form of learning...it then becomes clear that the most advanced form of understanding is achieved when researchers place

themselves within the context being studied” (Flyvbjerg 2006:236). In order to better understand the phenomenon of the relationship between Tallgrass and its surrounding community, I needed to position myself in the midst of that relationship.

Overview of the organizations in this study

Tallgrass Grocery Co-op is a new cooperative grocery store that opened in the Valley Junction district of West Des Moines, Iowa on September 15, 2011. According to the co-op’s website, “Tallgrass Grocery Co-op is a retail cooperative that will strive to provide access to healthy, locally grown organic food and products at prices that respect the livelihoods of local producers and the budgets of consumers” (Tallgrass Grocery Coop 2012). The co-op originated when a group of individuals who were interested in establishing a cooperative grocery store in the Des Moines metro area began meeting in the summer of 2010. They formed a steering committee, which became a board of directors when the co-op was incorporated in June 2011. The initial membership drive was for 200 founding members in the first month in order to ensure sufficient interest before proceeding with opening the co-op, but this number was quickly surpassed, with over 500 members joining in the first month.

The co-op is located in Valley Junction, a neighborhood and shopping district that is “home to over 150 specialty shops, restaurants, and services and the single largest collection of independent businesses in Greater Des Moines,” situated in the historic downtown district of West Des Moines (Historic Valley Junction Foundation 2012). When it opened, Tallgrass moved into the storefront that housed a fair trade

store, and some of the fair trade items continue to be sold at the co-op. The owner of this fair trade business was one of the original steering committee members of the co-op and served as its first general manager. The co-op is comparable in size to a small convenience store or a corner/neighborhood store, rather than a supermarket, the larger natural food stores located in the Des Moines metro area, or more established co-ops located in other cities in Iowa.

West Des Moines Human Services (WDMHS) is located two blocks north of the co-op and offers services such as rent, utility, and transportation assistance, transitional housing, and seasonal programs for low-income, elderly, and disabled citizens. The office also serves as the site for one of the Des Moines Area Religious Council (DMARC) Food Pantries, which differentiates it from other DMARC Food Pantries that are typically co-located with or featured as a service of nonprofit social service organizations rather than within the facilities of a city government department.

Valley Junction hosts a farmers' market each Thursday night from May through September in the street on which Tallgrass and WDMHS are located. There is also a community meal site located in the same neighborhood as these organizations. This site offers free lunches daily and free dinner on Tuesday and Thursday nights, and these meals are prepared by volunteers and sponsored by churches and WDMHS. The site also hosts a food pantry maintained through donations from area churches and community members. Additionally, there are several different organizations that provide in-home meal delivery to elderly and/or disabled people living in the Des Moines metro area. While the farmers' market,

community meal site, and meal delivery services are not directly a part of my study, they are important entities providing food in the neighborhood with which Tallgrass Grocery Co-op, West Des Moines Human Services, and the women I interviewed interact.

Participatory action research

The methodology I chose for this project was participatory action research, as I wanted to work with members of the community – those representing Tallgrass, WDMHS, and people living in the neighborhood who have low incomes – to bring about change (Baum, MacDougall, and Smith 2006; Gaventa 1993; Swantz 2008). This thesis is a snapshot of a period of time in the growth of Tallgrass, and most of the action that will bring about the desired change has not yet taken place at the time of this writing. The action I am trying to influence is the creation or modification of programming or policies that increase low-income community members' access to the healthy food available at the co-op, and this action will depend on what Tallgrass does with the recommendations I share with them, based on the findings of my research. Because of my relationship and past experiences with the staff, volunteers, and board members of Tallgrass, I feel confident that they will take actions based on these recommendations as much as they are able, especially as I have offered to help them do so. I am also hoping to influence the actions of WDMHS to continue to work with Tallgrass to provide more opportunities for their clients² to access healthy food. My intentions were to gain insights about what

² Throughout this thesis, I refer to the low-income women I interviewed as “clients” of West Des Moines Human Services, as this is the term used by the staff at WDMHS.

access to healthy food means to the clients of WDMHS and use these insights to inform the changes implemented by Tallgrass and WDMHS, rather than trying to directly change what foods people eat or otherwise directly change their relationship with healthy food.

My participation in this project occurs at a number of different levels. I am a member and volunteer of Tallgrass, and I have been granted some power in those roles to influence the changes that may come about as a result of this project. Additionally, I am participating as a researcher, learning about both organizations and the experiences of low-income community members. In addition to much of the action of this project taking place in the future, my participation will also continue in the future, as I help Tallgrass to implement the changes suggested by the findings of my research. My hope is that the participation of at least some of the women I interviewed will also continue in the future. I would like to help these women move into leadership roles at the co-op and in the food system more broadly. My ultimate vision for participation in this project is that it will serve as a springboard for people from both organizations and the larger community to work together to bring about the changes they would like to see in the food system.

My involvement with Tallgrass Grocery Co-op began in the summer of 2010, when one of the founding steering committee members informed me of the conversations that were taking place regarding the possibilities of starting a grocery co-op in Des Moines. I told her that I was interested in helping with this effort, as I really wanted Des Moines to have a co-op. However, my involvement remained passive and minimal, consisting of staying abreast of their progress by reading the

notes from the monthly meetings and also completing a survey regarding my preferences, interest, and opinions about various aspects of the co-op, until May 2011. At that time, a committee member requested that everyone involved with the steering committee and those on the mailing list increase their participation in order to help make the co-op a reality. I responded that I would be interested in helping out with the co-op more but was unsure in what capacity.

I attended the first consumer meeting in June, where several of the steering committee members spoke of their desire to make the co-op a place for all members of the local community, including those who have low incomes, to buy healthy food. Hearing this was very inspiring to me, because finding ways to close the gap between healthy food and people with limited financial means has been a perennial concern for me in my food system work. There are many initiatives and efforts being undertaken to promote more nutritious food and to support local food systems, but these are often only accessible to those who have a passion to participate in these efforts as well as the money to do so. Before I began my graduate studies, I worked in a variety of capacities with people with low incomes: at a nonprofit that builds affordable housing with people in need, as an advocate at a women's homeless shelter and later at a transitional housing facility for women and children, as well as in a school system where the majority of students qualify for free or reduced school meals. These positions gave me opportunities to understand more about the food system from the perspective of the people I worked with, as most of the organizations I worked for provided food, and I often shared meals with those served by the organization. Beyond this increased understanding about the often unhealthy

food given to those seeking services from agencies of these types, these experiences added new depths and dimensions to my passion for “helping people with low incomes.” Not only did my concern move from the abstract to the very concrete, as I developed relationships with a number of people with low incomes, but this concern also became informed by my growing beliefs about the commonalities and interdependence between myself and the people with whom I worked. Therefore, a co-op that expressed a desire to be inclusive rather than exclusive sounded like an excellent place for me to become more involved. After speaking more with the steering committee member from whom I had first heard about the co-op and considering ways in which I could increase my involvement with the co-op, I asked if I could begin attending steering committee meetings and focus my energies on outreach to local low-income community members. According to Swantz (2008:40), for most participatory action research projects “the starting point was a practical situation,” as was the case with this project.

I attended the final steering committee meeting for the co-op in June of 2011, during which individuals were nominated and elected to fill positions on the co-op’s first board of directors, and officers were chosen. I then began regularly attending board meetings during the months of July and August, and I also joined the membership and marketing committee, which would handle, among other things, outreach to the local neighborhood. In subsequent conversations with steering committee and board members, I offered to assist with the efforts to create a more welcoming atmosphere for people who have low incomes and/or receive federal food assistance benefits (e.g. Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program [SNAP],

Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children [WIC]) and to make the co-op a more affordable option for them, and everyone responded positively to this offer of help.

The general manager of the co-op gave me the contact information for and suggested that I speak with Erica³, the director of West Des Moines Human Services. Because of the sensitive nature of the relationship between WDMHS and the clients they serve, ensuring that Erica understood my motivations and intentions for this study and establishing trust with her were critical. I needed her permission to use the facilities of WDMHS as well as to recruit participants for this project from among their clientele. Additionally, conversations with Erica provided many ideas of ways to foster the relationship between Tallgrass and WDMHS, as well as the local low-income community as a whole. Baum et al. (2006:854) include in their definition of participatory action research that, “At its heart is collective, self reflective inquiry that researchers and participants undertake, so they can understand and improve upon the practices in which they participate and the situations in which they find themselves.” This type of self reflective inquiry could be undertaken in conversations with board and committee members of Tallgrass as well as in the conversations I planned to have with the low-income members of the community, with the hope that we could discover more about our actions and motivations in order to improve our practices.

³ The names used for the director, other staff members of West Des Moines Human Services, the ISU Extension EFNEP program assistant, and the WDMHS clients whom I interviewed are pseudonyms.

Participatory action research embraces Freire's (2003) concept of praxis by recognizing “that action and research must go together” (Baum et al. 2006:856). Though much of the action informed by this research will take place in the future, the project included my continued participation in meetings of the co-op’s board of directors and marketing committee in order to better understand the organization, to make sure that my work aligned with the mission of the co-op, and to advocate for the importance of this work. I assisted the board by completing the co-op’s application to accept Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Electronic Benefits Transfer, or SNAP EBT (formerly food stamps), as a form of payment and planned to look into the possibility of the co-op accepting cash value vouchers for fresh fruits and vegetables from the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC). Because of my involvement, when two board members resigned in October 2011, I was asked to serve as an interim board member until the directors that would be elected at the annual member meeting took their positions in January.

Discussions with Tallgrass board members and staff of WDMHS about how best to be inclusive of the low-income population generated various ideas of programs and policies that could be developed (e.g. waiving the membership fee and providing an additional discount for low-income members). However, I wanted to discuss these ideas with members of the low-income population and ask for their ideas as well, in order to better ensure the effectiveness and authenticity of the programs and policies that will be enacted. Furthermore, including these individuals and using their ideas to form the basis of the programming directed toward low-

income community members might serve as a way to disrupt the existing power structures by sharing the power to make decisions with the individuals who will be most affected by these decisions and who do not generally have access to the power to make these types of decisions. As Gaventa (1993:26) notes, it is typical that, “Where knowledge is produced about the problems of the powerless, it is more often than not produced by the powerful in the interest of maintaining the status quo, rather than by the powerless in the interest of change.” I wanted to use this research project for more than merely collecting data, and though I do have power conferred by my privileged position and identities, I wanted this project to be a means to work with “the powerless in the interest of change.” Based on the analysis of the qualitative data from the conversations with members of the low-income community, I will share my recommendations for programming and policies with the marketing committee, board members, and staff of Tallgrass Grocery Co-op, and I will assist them in the implementation of the ideas they select. In this way I will satisfy the provision of participatory action research that, as Swantz (2008:45) states, “Knowledge gained through research needs to become part of people’s lives.”

In-depth interviews

In addition to gathering data through the participation described above, my research methods consisted of conducting in-depth interviews with four low-income members of the community in which the grocery co-op is located as well as two outreach workers at West Des Moines Human Services. When I began recruiting

participants, I planned to conduct focus groups rather than interviews, because I was interested in observing the group dynamics and felt that more ideas for Tallgrass would be generated because of this group effect (Berg 2001:112). However, since there were so few people that volunteered to participate and their schedules conflicted, I instead conducted in-depth interviews. Though lacking the group dynamics and the manner in which participants in a focus group can build upon each other's ideas, in-depth interviews offer a space for "coconstruction of the interviewer's and an informant's experience and understanding of the topic of interest...[through] eliciting stories and case-oriented narratives" (Miller and Crabtree 2004:188-189). The stories, narratives, and co-construction of experiences and understandings that were shared and created in these interviews resulted in a rich and nuanced picture of the food landscape of low-income community members in the study area, which provided the insights I was seeking into my research questions.

In order to locate individuals who would be interested in participating, two meetings were held at the WDMHS offices to share information about the grocery co-op with their clients as well as other low-income community members. A member of the Tallgrass Grocery board of directors and I planned to facilitate these meetings and invite attendees to participate in the focus groups. I prepared a letter to hand out at the meetings explaining my project and more information about why I was looking for participation from among this group. I had planned to also post flyers about the project to locate additional participants after the meetings and to request the help of WDMHS staff in inviting other individuals to participate. Several days

prior to the informational meetings, flyers advertising them were posted around the offices of WDMHS and were also put in the food pantry orders that were distributed.

For a combination of reasons, no one attended either of these meetings. We found out afterward that one woman had gone to the main office looking for the meeting, but those in the office had not been informed about the meeting, nor was it on the calendar, and when they told the woman they did not know anything about this meeting, she left. While it was clear from this incident that I had not done enough to advertise the meetings or make sure that the staff was aware of them, there are likely other factors that contributed to lack of attendance. Among these may be that people did not read the flyer they received in their food pantry order or those that were posted around the offices of WDMHS. Also, if anyone did read the flyer, at that point in time, they did not know me and were likely unfamiliar with Tallgrass, and we therefore had not established any sort of relationship or trust. This trust is key in finding people who are willing to participate in a project like this. I made the mistake of basing my belief that people from WDMHS would be willing to talk to me on my past experiences working with people with low incomes who were, for the most part, willing to speak with me. But these people were willing to speak with me because I had established relationships and trust with them, and I had not yet done the same with the clients of WDMHS. Finally, the flyers did not demonstrate to the clients the value of taking the time to make a special trip to WDMHS for one of these meetings.

Because of this, I had to develop another plan to find participants for the focus groups. I went back to WDMHS and discussed the project with Brenda, an

outreach worker who had helped me earlier in the process of making contacts at Human Services. I explained to her what I had hoped to accomplish through the meetings and what I needed in order to move forward with my project. She volunteered to contact some of clients with whom she had an established relationship and who she thought might be interested in the project to ask if they would be willing to participate. I told her I would speak with anyone who was interested in talking with me, and she thought she would be able to find a few participants for my focus groups.

Brenda also informed me about a weekly nutrition class that Whitney, an Iowa State University Extension Expanded Food and Nutrition Education Program (EFNEP) Program Assistant, leads on site at WDMHS, and gave me her contact information. Whitney agreed to let me come to her class that week to attempt to recruit more participants. I went to the last few minutes of the class to avoid creating too much disruption, and I was able to speak with two women, both of whom agreed to participate in the focus groups. Whitney offered to tell another person she thought might be interested about the project, but she was unsure when she would see her next. I left information about my project with her and dropped in at the beginning of the nutrition class the following week to see if there were additional students in the class that I could recruit for my project. However, I was unable to recruit anyone else from this meeting, and Whitney did not succeed in recruiting the other person she had mentioned either.

Brenda, the WDMHS outreach worker, let me know she had found two people who indicated their interest in participating, and I called them both, as well as the two

women from the nutrition class, to arrange a time for the focus group. One of these individuals did not return my call, but I was able to schedule a focus group with the other three. However, two of the participants needed to reschedule, so at that point I decided to conduct interviews rather than focus groups. Jennifer, another outreach worker with WDMHS, contacted me after seeing me when I was interviewing one of the clients to suggest two more people who might like to participate, and I was able to schedule an interview with one of these women as well. In total, I interviewed four low-income community members, all of whom were women, and I estimate that their ages ranged between upper forties and mid sixties.

Allison and Diane, the women I recruited from the nutrition class, are sisters who live together, along with Allison's husband and Diane's partner, in an apartment in the Valley Junction neighborhood. They both have adult children, and Allison also spoke about her grandchildren, who live nearby. Allison and her husband are retired and receive Social Security, and neither she nor Diane works outside the home. Diane enjoys cooking and does most of the food preparation for the four of them, with their food choices restricted by the fact that Allison's husband is diabetic. They grew up in the country and spoke fondly of growing food and of meals shared with their childhood family, which included ten children. Allison and Diane enjoy each other's company and, at their request, I interviewed them together.

Helen was referred to me by a WDMHS outreach worker, and she lives alone in an apartment in West Des Moines. She spoke fondly about spending time with her children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren, many of whom live in the Des Moines area. She receives disability payments, and most of her meals come from a

meal delivery service for seniors. Helen's food choices are also constrained due to health issues, as she has diabetes and high cholesterol.

One of the WDMHS outreach workers also recruited Robin for my study. Robin has one adult child, and she lives by herself in a house in the Valley Junction neighborhood. She works as a substitute teacher in several school districts in the Des Moines metro area and has also recently started her own greeting card business, which she really enjoys. Robin learned to cook during summers spent on her aunt's farm growing up, and she continues to grow, prepare and preserve her own food.

Additionally, I interviewed the two outreach workers from WDMHS with whom I had already been in contact. Brenda is the current coordinator of the DMARC food pantry located at West Des Moines Human Services and has been an outreach worker at WDMHS for two years. She lives in West Des Moines with her husband and two teenaged children and explained that her family is pretty busy. Jennifer has worked at WDMHS for sixteen years and coordinated the food pantry for a number of those years. She lives with her husband and has adult children and grandchildren and spoke a lot about her family. Jennifer also discussed her interest in the connection between nutrition and health, an interest she shares with one of her daughters. Brenda and Jennifer both expressed their hope that the co-op is successful, as well as their desire for the co-op and Human Services to develop a strong relationship. Table 1 provides a list of the interviewees as well the individuals who helped me locate people to interview.

Table 1. Interviewees and people who connected me with interviewees

| <i>Name*</i> | <i>Affiliation with WDMHS</i> | <i>Role in project</i> |
|--------------|--|---|
| Allison | WDMHS Client | Interviewee (with Diane) |
| Diane | WDMHS Client | Interviewee (with Allison) |
| Helen | WDMHS Client | Interviewee |
| Robin | WDMHS Client | Interviewee |
| Brenda | WDMHS Outreach Worker and coordinator of onsite food pantry | Interviewee; recruited clients for interviews |
| Jennifer | WDMHS Outreach Worker | Interviewee; recruited clients for interviews |
| Erica | WDMHS Director | Met with me twice, allowed access to clients and use of space, helped design study |
| Whitney | EFNEP Program Assistant who facilitates nutrition class at WDMHS | Allowed me to recruit interviewees from her nutrition class; attempted to recruit additional interviewees |

* All names are pseudonyms

Because Brenda and Jennifer work directly with clients, their responses supplemented the data I had already collected in my conversations with the director of Human Services. These interviews brought in different perspectives on and responses to my research questions, thereby serving to make this a more robust study by both triangulating the findings from the earlier interviews and shedding some light on gaps in understanding and expectations between service providers, those receiving services, and people involved in working for change in the food system, including myself.

All of the interviewees and most of the people I worked closely with on this project, including my graduate committee members, are women. Some of this can be attributed to my personal comfort level in working with women and the fact that the fields of social work and food system work tend to attract more women than men. Even so, I also believe that this facet of my study is reflective of the highly gendered nature of food provisioning (Allen and Sachs 2007).

I used semi-structured, in-depth interviews to address questions about food access, nutrition, and the co-op while not limiting the information I obtained from the interviewees to more narrow categories. Miller and Crabtree (2004:185) have characterized “the interview as a partnership on a conversational research journey” which is an apt description of these interviews. This idea of an interview as a journey “helps us open to change in the process as the two (or more) partners develop their relationship and construct meaning. The hierarchy may shift, rules may change; improvisation emerges” (Miller and Crabtree 2004:188). Anticipating changes like these led me to be open to what emerged during the interviews, while having prepared a guide of questions helped ensure that the conversation always returned to addressing my research questions. Throughout all of the interviews, I listened and responded to the women in a compassionate, friendly, and mindful manner in order to demonstrate my trustworthiness to them. It was also very important to me that each of the conversations be a positive experience for the woman I spoke with, and I used this as a guide in my interactions with them. This emphasis was more natural than calculated, however, as I enjoyed speaking with the women I interviewed and giving them a chance to share their stories.

The conversations in the interviews with the persons with low incomes centered around the following topics: their current sources for accessing food; positive features of these sources; aspects of these sources that could be improved; things that would assist them in being able to acquire more nutritious food; and what the co-op could do to create a welcoming and affordable alternative for them. At the request of one of the Tallgrass board members, the interviewees were also asked

about their willingness to participate in and their perception of a need for education about nutrition and other topics through the co-op, as the co-op was applying for a specialty crop grant to create educational programming and wanted to include this data from the interviews in the grant application. I began the interviews by asking about a favorite memory relating to food. By asking this question, I was attempting to build rapport, create a relaxed, informal atmosphere, and help each woman realize that she had an important story to tell.

The interviews with the WDMHS staff members also followed a guide of semi-structured questions regarding similar topics, including some general questions about the community and the people served by WDMHS as well as more specific questions regarding their access to healthy food and the challenges that exist, and the outreach workers' ideas for ways that these challenges might be met through policies and community actions, including those of the co-op. Sample interview questions for both groups can be found in Appendix 1.

Interviews with the WDMHS clients were held at a coffee shop located across the street from the grocery co-op and either began or concluded with a tour of the store. As a token of appreciation, participants were given a gift card for the co-op, which they could use during the tour or at a later time. By including a tour of the co-op, I gave the participants a chance to become familiar with the store, and I was also able to observe them in the co-op. This yielded additional verbal and nonverbal data about their experience in shopping there as well as the environment of the co-op that I would not have been able to gather otherwise. The interviews with the WDMHS

staff members were conducted in their offices in order to be convenient for them and so that they were still accessible to their co-workers.

Data analysis

I asked each interviewee for permission to audio-record the interview, and I prepared a transcript of each interview. Additionally, I recorded audio notes immediately following each interview, during which I reflected on the interview and the tour of the co-op. I also took notes at most of the meetings I attended relating to Tallgrass. I created a section of analytical notes that included information about my observations throughout this process – from my first involvement with the co-op, to the early steering committee and board meetings I attended, to my interactions with the WDMHS staff – as well as my thoughts related to the project as a whole. All of this information was included in my data analysis in order to create a more thorough, precise, and complete picture of the co-op, the food landscape of low-income community members in this area, and how best to address the needs of this community. NVivo software was used to assist me in both organizing the data and in coding and analyzing the data using qualitative analysis. I coded the transcripts and notes for common themes as well as areas of disconnect, and for each theme, a node was created in NVivo. I then analyzed these themes in order to form my theories about commonalities and differences in the responses of the community members and the WDMHS staff members, along with what these commonalities and differences mean. This analysis will be discussed in greater depth in Chapter 4.

Establishing validity

One way I will ensure the validity of this study will be through member checks, by sharing my research findings with the interviewees. I will first contact the outreach workers from West Des Moines Human Services, and if they see my results as accurately reflecting their experiences and those of the clients with whom they work, I will have established member validation to some extent. I will also attempt to contact the women with low-incomes with whom I spoke and share my findings with them in order to more thoroughly ensure the accuracy of my analysis and representation in this paper. Due to issues of confidentiality and technology, following up with these individuals may take more time and prove more difficult, but it is important to ensure that they feel they have been represented accurately.

At the meeting of the Tallgrass Marketing Committee in May 2012, there was a great deal of discussion regarding ideas for improving the experience of shoppers at Tallgrass, and the general manager explained that customers were asking for more information and education. At that time, I shared my findings about the need for more educational information at the co-op, which was one of the major suggestions for Tallgrass that came out of the interviews. Because my findings were consistent with other data that the general manager had gathered, this helped to establish their validity. Another means of establishing validity was through comparing my findings with other research on access to healthy food and the experiences of low-income populations to look for connections to theory and other research results, as expanded on in Chapter 4. By triangulating my findings with this theory and prior research, I strengthened the validity of my study. Additionally,

because I used multiple sources of data, I was able to triangulate my findings from the interviews with clients of WDMHS with those from the interviews with WDMHS staff members. I was very thorough in my data analysis and maintained a detailed paper trail to both keep myself organized and to help establish validity as well. I have also been transparent about my orientation and my experiences throughout the project and this thesis, which further strengthens its internal validity.

Because of the level of participation of the researcher inherent in participatory action research, the criteria for establishing validity for a project of this type are different than in other forms of research. According to Moser (1975) there are three main criteria on which to judge the validity of this type of study, including, “transparency, which meant that all the participants were able to trace the whole process of the PAR, its functions, aims and methods[;]...compatibility of the aims with the methods and means with which they are reached,” which precludes the researcher from taking the part of an objective, disinterested observer; and a familiarity with that which is being studied that is greater than an outsider would have and the knowledge “that she has honestly set forth all the aspects she had become aware of” (as cited in Swantz 2008:43). Throughout this project, I attempted to be as transparent as I could with the interviewees, the WDMHS staff members, and those affiliated with Tallgrass Grocery. I explained in great detail why I became involved in this project and my aims with it to each of the women I interviewed. I never attempted to see myself or be seen by others as a detached, objective observer; rather, I made clear my biases, where I was coming from and why I was participating in this project in this way. The objective of the project is to create a

more inclusive co-op, and I believe the method and means I used here are compatible with that objective. Lastly, I can say with confidence that I have more knowledge about the co-op and its relationship to the community in which it is located than would an outsider, and I have done my best to honestly share that which I have learned. According to these criteria, I have established validity for this participatory project.

Confidentiality

I audio-recorded the interviews and assigned a pseudonym to each of the interviewees, as well as to the other women that helped me recruit interviewees, to use as an identifier during the transcription and analysis processes. The recording files, the key connecting the participants' real names to their pseudonyms, and any other digital files containing participants' real names or other identifying information have been stored on my password-protected personal computer.

Ethics of research

Interviews were conducted according to the guidelines I presented in the "Exempt Study Review Form" submitted to the Iowa State University Institutional Review Board (IRB). I received approval from the IRB and completed the Iowa State Human Subjects Training prior to the commencement of any interviews. Participation in this project was voluntary, and I let the participants know that they could opt out at any time or choose not to answer any question. I endeavored to be as transparent as possible about the purpose of this research in my interactions with everyone involved in the project. I gave each interviewee a letter detailing the

project and their potential participation and answered any questions they had about this. Before each interview, I asked the participant to sign a consent form outlining the purpose of the study, what I planned to do with the information, and her rights as they relate to the study, and we discussed the information on this form to be sure that she understood it completely.

In this chapter I have discussed my research setting, methodology, research methods, and data analysis. I have also outlined several means of establishing validity, as well as what I did to protect the confidentiality of those included in this study and to ensure that I followed ethical guidelines. The next chapter includes a discussion of my findings and my analysis.

Chapter 4. Results and Discussion

In this chapter I present my analysis of the interviews I conducted and the meetings I attended at West Des Moines Human Services and with Tallgrass Grocery Co-op. I examine the feelings expressed by the interviewees during the discussions about food, followed by an analysis of the values discussed by the women I interviewed, the organizational values of WDMHS and Tallgrass, and my own values that came into play in this project. I then identify the challenges faced by the low-income community members in relation to food and beyond, as well as their resourcefulness in confronting these challenges. Considerations of knowledge and power in the context of this study follow, and the analysis concludes with an examination of this project using a food sovereignty lens.

Feelings related to food

Food, being central to our lives, is naturally connected to powerful emotions, and during the interviews, a number of feelings and emotions became apparent or were discussed in relation to food. By beginning the interviews with the low-income women with a question about a favorite food memory or tradition, I hoped to both put the interviewees at ease and evoke positive feelings. They responded with stories of their childhoods or of raising their families and sharing food with people they loved, and they discussed the memories joyfully, if often with a touch of nostalgia as well. Many of the other feelings that came up during the interviews were also positive. Allison and Diane talked about how Diane's love for fried chicken probably stems from eating that for Sunday dinner with their whole family as they were

growing up. Another example of positive feelings came out when Jennifer, one of the WDMHS outreach workers, spoke about her daughter, who lived with her at the time, bringing home her CSA work share, exclaiming,

So she'd bring that food into my house, and I was just so, I just felt I was so rich. I just felt like the richest man in the world, you know, just, gosh! I had this food in my house and it was grown organically and you know, I just felt so good about, you know, being able to put it in a salad.

The clients all enjoyed visiting Tallgrass and were excited to find different items there, while Jennifer and Brenda, the food pantry coordinator and outreach worker at WDMHS, both talked about the way it feels in the co-op and that it has a good, friendly vibe. Robin also talked about being "thrilled" to receive whole-wheat pasta in her food pantry order.

There were also examples of negative feelings that were expressed during the interviews. Brenda talked about how sad it is to see so many new people in need of assistance. While Helen talked with fondness about cooking meals for her children as they were growing up, she then described how tired she felt being a single mother, feeding her family in the midst of working full-time and taking care of the house. She also stated that her sister died after taking her insulin and then going back to sleep, and Helen is afraid that this is going to happen to her, too. Negative feelings also arose as each of the clients talked about things in the pantry orders they did not like and as many of them also talked about other difficulties in obtaining the food they wanted or needed.

Some of the feelings that came out during the conversations were not so easily categorized as purely positive or negative, revealing the ambivalence that

accompanies food or particular aspects of many people's relationship with food. For example, Robin described with great pride the way that she planned for and prepared all the food for her family, even when she was to be out of town for work. At the same time, she exhibited frustration with the fact that her husband did not even know how to cook food on the grill. Ambivalence often came out in discussions of dietary restrictions or health concerns that limit or restrict the consumption of certain beloved foods. Diane and Helen both talked about this, with Helen expressing it several times during the interview. In fact, when asked how she would change her food landscape if she could make any changes she wanted to, Helen replied, "You know I'd like to be able to just, sit down to my mama's cooking sometime and just eat...but, and not worry about everything so much, you know?"

Values

Values play a significant role in food choices and in the way people look at and relate to food, and they likewise inform the way organizations and individuals involved in the food system do their work (Gregory and Gregory 2010; Inglis, Ball, and Crawford 2005). They also played a significant role in the interviews I conducted, as well as in meetings and conversations with representatives of Tallgrass Grocery and WDMHS. Robin really values nutrition and taking care of herself, explaining "I always figure, if I'm gonna eat it, it just as well be worthwhile eating, instead of just putting something in your mouth." She spoke about going for a walk with a friend every day, and this appears to be a priority for her as well. She expressed some disbelief at the lack of healthy food purchased by many people on

food stamps when she sees them in the store, but then stopped herself and said she should not be judgmental, considering she does not know if that is the way they always eat. Allison and Diane also expressed their desire for more nutritious foods, partly in answer to health concerns and also because they prefer the taste of fresh fruits and vegetables to most other foods. Health concerns are quite significant for Helen as well, and so she also spoke about enjoying fresh produce and desiring more of it. For Jennifer, food and nutrition has been important for a long time and she has always wanted to continue learning in this realm, and she explained that one of her daughters shares this value. Speaking about her daughter, she said, "She's home doing that, living a life that's pretty meager, but making those choices because it's more important to have excellent food on the table for her children than to have a new car and furniture and you know, not that those are wrong, but it's a choice." She talked about how this is not the case for many of the WDMHS clients, and she wonders how to motivate people to desire something different and to value health and nutrition more highly. Brenda talked about the co-op being a good place for people for whom nutrition and feeding their kids good food is a priority, but she explained that a lot of people just do not have the "space" for that to be a priority.

Brenda talked about how receiving something for free is a powerful motivator for everyone, but especially for people for whom money is tight. The "lack of work ethic" displayed by some of the clients served at WDMHS is very frustrating to Brenda. She clearly values a strong work ethic and is discouraged when the people she is helping do not share this value, because it will be difficult for them to find and keep a job.

During our conversation, Brenda was concerned that I might hear what she was saying as stereotyping, but I reminded her that what I had asked her to do was to speak in generalities, since I had already had some chance to talk to individuals. I had asked her to give me an idea of the population as a whole, which is hard to do without making some large generalizations, and I assured her that I know she does not see all people that way. My interactions with both Brenda and Jennifer coincide with the findings of Duffy et al. (2006) that the attitudes of food pantry directors were as or less judgmental of their clients than were the clients' attitudes toward themselves. In general, the outreach workers did not speak in a judgmental way about their clients, though like most everyone, they did slip a few times. When they did, they were typically quick to check that judgment and to find commonality with the people about whom they were speaking. This respectful, non-judgmental way of viewing and working with people became apparent to me as an organizational value of WDMHS during these interviews, though it interacts with other values, both organizational and personal, and therefore may not always be the most salient value in a given exchange.

Jennifer told me about advice that Erica, the director of WDMHS, gives her and the other outreach workers to “just do what you can do” and “offer the help that we can offer,” and she has found it quite helpful to adopt this sort of mindset. Though Brenda did not discuss this directly, from what I have witnessed in our interactions, I believe she too has adopted a mindset like this, and I believe this is another value of WDMHS. In my experience working in social services, I have worked in agencies and with peers and supervisors that have embraced this

approach and those that have not, and based on these experiences, I think this type of approach is quite vital both to the social worker and to the clients with whom s/he is working. It is very taxing to see so much hardship and need day in and day out, and many people become cynical from this exposure. An approach such as that described by Jennifer helps one to stay present to the situation, treat the client as an individual, and hopefully avoid burnout, and it also helps to shape the atmosphere of the organization, which affects those seeking services as well.

Brenda also told me about an experience with a clothing store in Valley Junction that donated gift cards to the clients of WDMHS so they could shop for free clothes. After sending some women to the store with gift cards, Brenda heard from the shop's owner, who was upset that the women did not look like they were in that bad of a situation and that they were not buying clothes for work, citing one woman who bought a sequined jacket. Brenda responded that she had not put any restrictions on what the women could purchase and told me,

You know, the woman that I sent down that bought the sequined jacket, she's like an older – she's an old lady. She's from Brooklyn, New York. She used to be a ballet dancer. The woman is old, has health problems; she at one time used to be somebody. She loves that dang jacket...She sent me a thank you card. Every time I see her, she's wearing that jacket. It's the highlight of her life. So what?

Brenda related this story to explain the importance of being welcoming to everyone at the co-op and not expecting people with low incomes to look a certain way or “having strings attached” to the programs Tallgrass implements to serve these folks.

Jennifer related a story of an attempt they had made to start a community garden so that people could have access to more healthy food and more of a

connection to their food. The garden was not very successful, as few people were interested in and able to commit to participating. She also talked about the program through which they offer vouchers allowing clients to purchase seeds or transplants, relating that only a small number of people take advantage of this program. Things like this cost very little money, but she observed that many people still do not want to take part and wondered about the reasons why this is so. She questioned what could be done to give people the desire to make changes in their own lives, and what changes they would make if they could, saying,

You know, what would you do? If you, if it just didn't hurt and it didn't, you know, but I, I don't know...I think it does hurt. I mean the only thing that doesn't hurt is how they get to walk in here and pick it up for free...So maybe...maybe more of those kinds of outlets in more places.

While not referring to physical pain here, Jennifer touches on the level of discomfort some people may have in making changes, as well as how difficult it is for many of the clients of WDMHS to find the time and energy to invest in programming and interventions that require a greater amount of effort. In talking about it more, she recognized that she too has barriers to growing her own healthy food, so she can understand how others, even those who share her values around nutrition, might have similar challenges.

Tallgrass Grocery Co-op focuses on local, fresh, in-season, and healthy products, which they define as avoiding pesticides, fertilizers, hormones, antibiotics, high fructose corn syrup, and additives. In the co-op's mission statement, it says that they will provide access to these "products at prices that respect the livelihoods of local producers and the budgets of consumers." Board and committee members

were supportive of this project from the beginning, stressing the importance of being a place for everyone to shop and their desire to not be elitist in the first consumer meeting, and they have all remained supportive. One way this was evidenced is through their desire, early on, to have the capability of accepting SNAP EBT with the point of sale system they purchased and to have that set up as quickly as possible. At the same time, though, it is possible that this value of Tallgrass and the assumptions upon which it is built may not fully consider the challenges faced by low-income individuals (Andreatta et al. 2008). For instance, who are the consumers to whom the mission statement refers? Does it consider consumers broadly or is there an assumption about a certain level of income needed to be able to pay those prices?

In the first Tallgrass board and marketing committee meetings I attended, there was some time spent working through questions that helped the organization to better articulate its values, such as whether to provide plastic or paper bags and whether to make decisions by consensus or a majority vote. As Gregory and Gregory (2010:100) point out, speaking about the alternative food system movement, “Although its fundamental values may be revolutionary, they are also complex.” After the store had been open for a while, the conversation shifted to consider how to market the co-op and to whom, which I believe raises several important questions. For example, how far does an organization push people to accept its values, and how can it define those shared values in a way that encourages inclusivity rather than exclusivity? In the case of creating a welcoming atmosphere for everyone, especially low-income community members, the

organization will have to find a way to share its message about its values without coming across as being exclusively a place for people who embrace those values with a similar fervor, as this could result in alienating the very people they are trying to reach.

As England (1994:87) argues, “We need to locate ourselves in our work and to reflect on how our location influences the questions we ask, how we conduct our research, and how we write our research.” My own values came out in this research project in a variety of ways. The reason I took a participatory approach with this project stems from my values and ideas about justice and fairness meaning more than merely equal or even equitable distribution of goods. Rather, I believe that participation and sovereignty are key elements of justice, and taking a participatory approach was essential in order for this project to be as just as I could make it. However, my experience with trying to set up informational meetings with the WDMHS clients supported the concept that this type of participatory approach is best taken by someone from within the community or someone who has an already-established relationship with the people they are trying to involve. I had much better results when I leveraged the already-established trust between the outreach workers and/or the EFNEP program assistant and the low-income community members than when I attempted to reach out to them on my own and will incorporate this deeper understanding of participation into the values that guide my approach to future projects.

My values and beliefs, including my belief that everyone has a right to healthy food, arose in several of the interviews and meetings in which I took part as well. I

shared my motivations for this project and what I hoped to accomplish with the women I interviewed so they would better understand why I was asking to speak with them. I acknowledge that being so open with these things may have had an effect on the conversations, but I did not want to be dishonest with the people with whom I was talking. However, I also struggled throughout the project in questioning my motivations and goals, sometimes feeling like a salesperson for the co-op, which was not my intent. On the one hand, I felt that since it is a local source of healthy food, community members should be able to take advantage of it being there and access some of that food. Yet on the other hand, I wonder about the unintended consequences of trying to "market" the co-op to this population.

Challenges related to food

There are a number of challenges that accompany food for many people – from deciding what to eat to being able to afford their favorite foods. For people with low incomes, these challenges are often magnified by a scarcity of financial resources and the accompanying difficulties. As Brenda put it, “Our clients are the same as...the same thoughts, feelings that we do. But their situations are usually a little bit more dire and things are a little bit more, ‘...and then some.’ You know what I mean? Multiplied.” During the interviews I conducted with the low-income women and the outreach workers from WDMHS, many of these challenges, including health concerns, cost of food, and time, planning, and skills involved in cooking were discussed. Some of these challenges are the results of constraints at the food system level, others occur more on the individual level, and still others are caused

by an interaction of factors at both the system and individual levels. The challenges discussed and the way they were discussed reflect the gendered nature of food provision, as most of the women are responsible for procuring and preparing food for themselves and their families, though there was little direct conversation about this. While recognizing that these challenges often interact with and are intensified by one another and that it is difficult to categorize some of them as just one thing, in order to share my results, I have nevertheless made an effort to categorize them here.

Health concerns

National and local studies have found high rates of diet-related health conditions, such as diabetes, in low-income and food insecure populations (Drewnowski and Specter 2004; MoveTheFood Initiative 2010). There were a number of health concerns voiced in the interviews, many related to diet. Allison's husband is diabetic, so she and Diane both discussed the challenges that accompany finding, choosing, and affording foods that are compatible with his needs. Allison explained that, "It takes awhile to get used to it but, after fifteen years, you kinda get used to it." They spoke of needing to read labels and eat things like whole-wheat and sugar-free foods or sweeteners with a low glycemic index, which are more difficult to find and are often more expensive. Diane is the one who typically cooks for their family (Diane, her boyfriend, Allison, and Allison's husband), and she has had some difficulty adjusting to cooking this way, especially since Allison's husband should not have many of her favorites dishes to prepare, such as fried foods and baked goods. They also pointed out that not everything they eat

could be considered a healthy choice for a diabetic, because they often have to make do with whatever they have.

Helen related some of her medical conditions, as well, including the injury she sustained while working that forced her to retire early and receive disability payments, which provide her with a limited income. As we walked through Tallgrass and during the interview, she discussed a lot of foods she should eat and those she should avoid due to having diabetes and high cholesterol, but she also expressed the sentiment several times that, "It's just so hard to know what to eat, you know?" Throughout the interview, she communicated her frustration with not being able to eat some of the foods she loved most as well as her struggles to procure enough of the foods she needs. She receives many of her meals from a meal delivery service, and when I asked her what she liked or would change about those meals, she replied, "I wish it could be more, uh, designed for diabetics...I wish they could have more vegetables."

The WDMHS outreach workers also discussed the health concerns of many of their clients, with Brenda citing a questionnaire completed by those who receive food from the food pantry, stating that a number of them replied that someone in their household has been diagnosed with diabetes, heart disease or high blood pressure. A few years ago, after learning about the health conditions many of their clients were experiencing, the DMARC food pantry network overhauled the types of food they distribute to make them more nutritious, and Jennifer expressed how glad she was to have witnessed this change, as prior to this,

It was concerning because it felt bad, it felt like well, so poor people eat the

dredges of food, and then they're gonna continue to have major medical issues, you know, major comprehension issues, you know, academic issues, all of that stuff.

Several of the interviewees also talked about the diet-related medical conditions of friends and family members as well as in more general terms discussing the prevalence of obesity in children and adults.

Cost of food

Another major challenge discussed by the interviewees is the cost of food, considering the constraints of their budgets. When I asked the clients to tell me about the places where they acquire their food and what they liked about these places, the responses to the first part of the question varied. However, they all said they shopped at these places because of the cheaper prices, though sometimes they had other reasons for their choices as well, such as variety or quality. These findings correspond with that of the metaanalysis completed by Herrera et al. (2009) that affordability is the most influential factor in determining where low-income consumers acquire food. Allison and Diane shop mainly at Wal-Mart and Aldi because of the cost, though they said that some things at Wal-Mart are expensive and the prices are rising. When I asked if they cooked a lot, Diane replied, "We have to – can't afford to go out and eat – we gotta cook." Helen receives most of her meals on a waiver from the meal delivery service, but she also buys groceries at Hy-Vee or Aldi. She explained that many of the things she likes are expensive so she rarely buys them, and that she shops at Aldi because of the low prices. Robin shops at Fareway for meats and produce and at Wal-Mart for staples, unless they are on

sale at Hy-Vee or Dahl's, as she always watches the ads for deals.

In speaking about the WDMHS clients, Jennifer observed that if people do not have the education to understand how different foods affect them, their decisions about what to eat would be influenced by cost, convenience, and taste. Several studies support this statement (Eikenberry and Smith 2004; Lucan et al. 2010; Wiig and Smith 2009;). Brenda noted that she thinks their clients shop at Wal-Mart due to the prices and that one specific location has lower prices than other Wal-Mart stores in the area. The clients also shop at Aldi, and she occasionally sees clients at Hy-Vee or even Dahl's, where she does not typically shop because it is so expensive. When she sees them in these last two stores, though, they are usually just picking up a few items, and she thinks the people she sees at Dahl's walk there from nearby apartments. Brenda said that she also shops at Wal-Mart when she is short on funds, though she does not prefer it, but if she is buying a lot of groceries for her family, she goes there because of the variety and low prices.

Healthy food affordability and accessibility

Much of the conversation I had with the interviewees and the board members and committee members from Tallgrass revolved around the affordability of and accessibility to healthy food for the low-income members of the community, both more generally and as it related to the prices of food at the co-op. Though there have been studies that argue otherwise (Carlson and Frazão 2012; Stewart et al. 2011), for the low-income women with whom I spoke, accessing and affording healthy food is indeed a significant challenge.

Robin explained that she does not shop at the farmers' market because the food is so expensive, but she thinks the leftover food should be donated to the food pantry, as this would make it easier for her to acquire the healthy food that she prefers. She noted she has not received much of this type of food from the pantry. Brenda confirmed that although there is no formal arrangement for the Valley Junction Farmers' Market, vendors do donate produce to the food pantry, and the food pantry also receives some of the donations from the Downtown Farmers' Market. Perhaps Robin does not make it in on those days due to her work schedule, or it may be that this food is so popular that it is gone before she arrives. She asked if they could receive vouchers that could be spent at the farmers' market in order to increase their access to fresh fruits and vegetables, as she thought this would be a great idea. Allison and Diane talked about how much they do enjoy shopping at the farmers' market, but in general they said it is harder to track down the healthier food, and it is more expensive. They questioned why things without sugar are more expensive than items that contain sugar. Allison explained that they would love to be able to shop at an organic place, but they are on a budget, "And it doesn't stretch very far when you have to buy the organic foods and natural foods." They mentioned many times that what they would like the most is to have more fresh produce and healthier food in general, because it is difficult for them to acquire it. In fact, when I asked if they had space for a garden, they replied sadly that they just have a patio, with Allison stating, "because if we had vegetables and fruit, that's probably all we would eat."

Helen expressed a similar view, saying, "I mean I would need more money to

eat the way I want to, you know? I mean it does cost money to eat healthily."

Brenda echoed this sentiment, remarking,

I do think more people would buy the fruits and the vegetables and that sort of thing – the fresh stuff. And I only say that because when we put it out, people just, honestly, just scarf on it. I just feel like people are excited to get the produce...I don't know this because I've heard anybody say it, but my intuition says that that's probably stuff that they don't – they can't really afford at the store...Is that's sort of like a luxury item.

Jennifer explained that many people come to the pantry looking for healthier foods and vouchers for things like milk and eggs, and sometimes they have those items to hand out. She also noted that the produce is pretty popular. Overall, most of the people with low-incomes I talked to or discussed in the interviews expressed their desire to have more healthy food, suggesting their diets would be quite different if desire were the biggest factor determining the food they ate.

Some of the conversation about healthy food affordability and accessibility specifically referred to Tallgrass Grocery. Allison commented on how much a green pepper cost there and how far out of their budget a meal like stuffed peppers would be at that price. In looking at some of the other items, though, she commented that the prices were less than those at Wal-Mart for comparable items. In discussing several plans for discounts or ways to make things more affordable for the low-income community members, Allison asked why the co-op cannot just lower their prices, rather than creating all these discount programs. She went on to say there must be better ways to grow the food so that it does not cost so much, and then they could lower the prices. Allison later asked me why good food is so expensive, and unfortunately, I did not have a ready or simple answer.

Helen was really impressed by the co-op but found many of the items pretty pricey, wishing they would lower some of the prices and stating simply, "Now I can't, I can't afford a lot of that." Robin said that the prices were not too high for her but that they would be for a lot of people, especially for large families. Jennifer feels that prices at the co-op are a bit too high for people who are trying to stretch their food dollar and that it seems like a gourmet type of shop. "You know, if you have money and if you, you know, are the people 'with,' then you can shop here, and if you're 'without,' then sorry." She was not referring to the atmosphere or the way she was treated at the co-op, but merely the message that the high prices send to people. Jennifer was glad to know that they accept SNAP benefits there and wondered if it might be cheaper for the co-op and for its customers if bulk items were sold. Though this could be beneficial for a number of reasons, I later learned that Tallgrass is not able to sell items in bulk bins in its current location because of how it is licensed and the on-site equipment it lacks. Having healthy snacks available was another suggestion Jennifer made for the co-op, as well as using a staple item of some kind that was affordable to bring people in. She compared it to Gateway Market in Des Moines, saying how much fun those places are to walk around and pick up a thing or two, but that most people could not afford to do the majority of their shopping there.

A focus at Tallgrass Grocery is providing nutritious food. In a meeting with one of the co-op board members to discuss my project, we talked about offering free or discounted memberships for low-income people. She also shared that some time in the future, Tallgrass could create a non-profit arm where programs and projects

like this could be funded. Perhaps people could donate to the foundation at the checkout and then the money would go to increase the discount for low-income members or to support a community garden, among other ideas. Erica suggested sponsorships for the memberships, offering payment plans, or a volunteer program for low-income members, and she also suggested setting aside a portion of the profits for them or giving them some shopping money to start. Robin explained that paying \$100 for a co-op membership would not be something she could do, as she could easily buy a month's worth of groceries with that much money, while Allison stated she did not see the value in becoming a member of the co-op. Robin thought that some sort of discount would encourage low-income people to shop at the co-op, but Jennifer thought that the five percent member discount would probably not be enough to "turn the key."

Time, planning, cooking

Another challenge that was discussed during the interviews and meetings relates to time, planning, and food preparation skills frequently involved in eating healthy food, and the need or desire for foods that are more convenient. In several studies, this challenge has been found as a factor influencing food choices of other low-income populations (Eikenberry and Smith 2004; Lucan et al. 2010; Wiig and Smith 2009). Even though having meals delivered to your home should be convenient, Helen discussed the difficulties she has in receiving the food in good condition and according to the directions she has given the drivers, saying, "It's just a hassle, but...it's just that I'm not home every day, just sitting there waiting for food

like some of them are." This hassle includes making sure the temperature of the food has not made it unsafe to eat, trying not to waste it, and dealing with the garbage. She does cook sometimes but said she hates to always have to clean up afterwards, and as she spent many years cooking for her children and taking care of the house on her own, she does not want to do the same thing every day at this point in her life.

Brenda, in explaining how difficult it is for some families to eat healthy food, said the following:

And the other thing is, Jess, a lot of our clients live on the edge. You know what I mean? Not a lot of planning for much of anything. For getting rent paid, for getting their bills paid, for getting to the grocery store and having something to cook. So I mean, sometimes when you are eating healthier, you gotta kind of plan. There's a little prep involved; there's a little planning; there's a little time that you have to spend, and, you know, these folks are flying by the seat of their pants. And so, swinging through the drive-thru or picking up, you know, something premade at the, frozen pizza or something at Quik Trip, might be dinner.

Brenda also discussed her own situation, explaining that she and her family are all so busy and by the time everyone is home, they are all hungry, and she does not always cook or plan either. She said, "I fly by the seat of my pants," as well, but she tries to have food in the house and her situation is less chaotic. She and I both admitted to finding the appeal in foods that are convenient, given how hectic life can be.

In talking about some people taking the time to prepare food, Jennifer pointed out that many people are not home enough to do this, and they may just grab something on the way to their next event. Her daughter worked for a share of food on a CSA farm, and she spoke about the energy and desire required to do so, and that

this would not be something everyone would want to or would have time to do. She also talked about how it is probably easier for most people to just keep doing what they are doing rather than learning something new about food and nutrition. When Jennifer's children were growing up, they made it a point to sit around the dinner table as a family, and she worries that as people move away from that and eat on the go more and more, something important is being lost.

Unlike the clients Brenda referred to above, Robin explained that she always cooks, and Diane stated that she does as well. However, when talking about other people, Robin wondered if they know how to cook and if they are willing to cook, "Whether it's they haven't been trained to do it...or whether it's laziness on their part. I don't know. You know, I don't know what their schedule is." She also pointed out that she has observed people purchasing a great deal of convenience food on their food stamps. Some nights she has to hurry to meet a friend to exercise, but she tries to plan to have leftovers ready for that night. During the warmer months she cooks on the grill a lot because it is easier and healthy, and Diane and Allison grill out a lot as well because it is better for all of them. Robin also explained that when she was raising her family, she would sometimes have to travel, but she would still be responsible for preparing all the meals, and she therefore developed skills in cooking a lot of food at once and then having meals ready and in the freezer. Jennifer, on the other hand, talked about how she does not use her freezer or her crock pot nearly enough, and had she done so more in the past, she could have saved a lot of money. She also stated that the Hispanic clients of WDMHS use all of the food they receive, and they also cook their own meals much of the time.

Tallgrass Grocery does not carry many of the items that would typically be found at a grocery store or at a superstore, and this makes shopping there difficult for low-income people and others for whom time is a premium. This is especially the case for those who do not have their own transportation and have to rely on rides or public transportation. It is far less convenient to shop at multiple stores than if everything can be purchased in one place. People from the co-op have discussed carrying "take-out" items or serving as a CSA pick-up site in order to offer more convenience to customers. Allison and Diane talked about how easy and convenient it is to go to a fast-food restaurant, but Allison said, "That's the worst kind of foods for you," and they suggested that there should be more healthy food that is convenient.

Other challenges

There are a number of challenges that arose in the interviews that are not directly related to food, but that impact the women I spoke with and other WDMHS clients. A major challenge these women face is making ends meet with the relatively small amount of or inconsistent income they make. Allison has retired and receives Social Security, while Helen receives disability pay, and Diane did not discuss her income source. Robin was not able to find a full-time teaching job when she moved back to Iowa from out of state, and is therefore working as a substitute teacher. Though she is signed up to teach in four school districts, there is no guarantee that she will be assigned a job on any given day. The system requires her to be logged in to her computer at a certain time, when they begin to send out the requests for

substitutes, and then she has to reply quickly in order to get the job. She also discussed the fact that she is often not free to come in and pick up her food pantry order before 3:00, so she might miss out. Robin is quite busy, and juggling a lot, describing her situation as,

I don't have the extra, I mean, between trying to do this new design with the card business, substitute teaching, and handling my mother in a care facility, and handling the place. You know, and if I'm trying to do a garden on top of it, you know - I'm stretched. You know, so for me, you know, 'cause it's not like, okay, I can go in and clean the house, and my husband can mow the yard. It's, okay, you know, it means I clean the house, that means I go mow, and it's, I don't have anybody else to hoe the garden. So it's me that's gonna do it all.

Another challenge that provides context for the challenges related to food is the continuing effect of the financial crisis. Brenda discussed the growth in demand for their services in the last few years, with many people coming in and seeking assistance for the first time in their lives. On the other hand, she also pointed out that there are many people for whom seeking these sorts of services is "generational; this is all they know," which presents a challenge of a different sort. Clients come to WDMHS for a variety of services, including rent assistance, energy assistance, transitional housing, transportation services, home repair services, school supply backpacks, garden vouchers, summer lunch program, holiday programs, the food pantry, and a personal care items pantry. At the time of my interview with Brenda, the date had just passed after which the utility companies could turn off power for those who had not paid their bills, so WDMHS had been quite busy with people seeking energy assistance. Jennifer conveyed how rewarding it is to know that you have helped someone, though she recognizes that

most of the time they “can't fix everything. Can't even fix anything sometimes, but you can sit in here and, and I can know something that...you'd like to get off your chest, or I can know something that I can encourage you about.”

Other challenges include living arrangements and difficulties seeking services or participating in activities for those who struggle with social interactions. Helen does not seem to like her living arrangements very much, as it is noisy and not very private, and the woman that cleans her apartment does not clean it up to her standards, but she is physically unable to do most of that work herself. Allison and Diane would like to have room for a garden at their place but only have a patio. I asked them if they would be interested in taking part in a community garden if one were established in the neighborhood, and they replied that they feared they would be the ones doing all the work while others reaped the benefits, and Allison said she does not enjoy socializing and would not find that aspect of the community garden at all agreeable. In fact, Allison told me that she almost backed out of our interview because she is “just not a social person,” but that she was glad she came because she enjoyed it and could not believe how much she talked. Brenda noted how difficult it can be for many people to walk into a setting like a community meal site on their own, and this difficulty may cause them to miss out on accessing services for which they are qualified.

In discussing raising her family, Helen talked about coming home after a long day of work and having to work for eight more hours taking care of the children and the house, a situation that is common for many single parents, and one that presents a lot of challenges. Jennifer talked about one of her daughters, who is a single

parent struggling to make ends meet, but pointed out that she is learning about nutrition from Jennifer's other daughter who is very interested in food and nutrition. Her third daughter and son-in-law both make a good living, but they spend a lot of their budget on other things and do not prioritize food, and so Jennifer worries about what their children are learning about food.

Resourcefulness

As significant as the challenges described above are, another recurring theme in the interviews was how very resourceful these women and the other clients of WDMHS are in working to ensure their food security. Carney (2012) found in her study of three low-income communities in California, that low-income households employ the coping strategies of producing their own food, receiving food assistance from public and private sources, bargain procurement, and "revitalizing at-home food preparation." These strategies are quite similar to those demonstrated by the women with whom I spoke. One way the women in my study cope with food insecurity is by utilizing a variety of sources of food. In addition to the stores discussed above, all of the women also obtain food from the food pantry, sourcing food there every month. WDMHS has bread available every day, and they often put out fresh produce or other donated items, and people are welcome to take these things whenever they are available. Helen said that she loves to shop at the farmers' market, as do Allison and Diane, who shop there every week because they so enjoy eating the fresh fruits and vegetables, as Allison put it, "right out of the ground." Some of the vendors accept SNAP EBT as payment, but Brenda is not sure

how many of the WDMHS clients shop at the farmers' market. Since they often receive whatever is left over from the market, she questioned why their clients would spend their money on the food when they could receive it for free from the pantry.

Robin grows her own food in her garden, using seeds from WDMHS, but the other clients I interviewed all live in apartments and lack the space to grow food. While Brenda stated that most people do not utilize the community meal site in the neighborhood due to the atmosphere, unless they really need a meal or a place to go for a holiday meal, Jennifer did not mention the atmosphere, citing it as a good place for people to find free meals and a food pantry with no qualifications needed. Robin talked about going to church on Wednesday nights and explained that they serve a meal that night, and Jennifer mentioned that there are lots of places around town that offer free meals; it is just a matter of finding them.

Another way that the women I spoke with demonstrate their resourcefulness is by "stretching the food dollar" through combining or substituting ingredients to make a meal more affordable or more nutritious. Robin spoke a lot about different ways that she has learned to do this, such as adding bran to her chocolate chip cookies, stockpiling or freezing items that she finds on sale or at the pantry, or substituting a less-expensive item or something she receives from the food pantry for a more costly item in baking or cooking. She will do this in ways that make these items less noticeable, for example, using the canned carrots she receives from the pantry in carrot cake or in soups, or using canned milk in baking. I shared with Brenda and Jennifer the idea of having Robin or someone else from the low-income community lead a class on, as she put it "nutrition ideas, and some cooking ideas

that are simple and easy, and ways to cut the corners," and how to stretch the food budget. Jennifer talked about doing the same thing when her kids were growing up, adding some vegetables and meat to a box of macaroni and cheese to make it more nutritious and more of a meal.

Another way the clients show their resourcefulness is through using what they have and not wasting food. Allison and Diane were discussing the food they receive from the pantry, with Allison asking, "Who wants to open a can of green beans, rinse them off," and Diane interjected, "Then heat them up in water?" Allison went on to say, however, "But sometimes we do...It's just what we have to do." They explained that they were raised in the country and their family had ten kids. They always had a big garden and, as Diane put it, "You learned how to eat what was in the cupboard." Allison and Diane as well as Robin reported cooking regularly, which coincides with Carney's (2012) finding that at-home preparation of food has become a coping strategy for low-income people, particularly since the economic crisis. When people use the pantry for the first time, Brenda makes sure they know that it is not "fancy food" but rather staples and shelf-stable items, and most people reply that it is "better than what [they] have." Helen talked about carrying a cooler with her so that she could preserve the meals from the delivery service and also about trying to use all of the food they give her by stockpiling it or freezing it and eating it later, though this can prove difficult for her. She also spoke of not being able to eat strawberries because of the seeds, but that she will peel them so that she can still enjoy them, even though it is "a hassle." Helen also shares some of the surplus she receives with her family members, as she knows they can use the extra food.

Robin and Helen both reported that they watch the ads and then go to a store specifically to buy items that are on sale. They stock up on staples when they are on sale or purchase items that are inexpensive at a given store. Brenda suggested that a way to bring people into the co-op would be to offer free items and/or coupons, as the women I spoke with and other clients use coupons, especially in combination with sales, and most people enjoy receiving something for free.

Another strategy that Jennifer mentioned for making ends meet was "families bunking up, you know; there's single moms with kids; there's single dads with kids, maybe living with a parent...several generations living together." This is the type of living situation Allison and Diane are in, with the sisters and their partners sharing an apartment. In these situations, Jennifer said that people sometimes pool their food stamps and shop together.

SNAP benefits are a resource available to some but not all of the WDMHS clients, and only one of the women I interviewed. Diane qualifies for SNAP, but Allison does not, so they share the benefits. Allison did not explain why she does not qualify, but Robin does not receive them because she would have to turn in proof of her employment. Since her work is unpredictable and she works for multiple school districts, she would need to submit a letter from each district saying how many days she will work for them in a month. She is certain this would be a lot of work for the school districts, and given that most substitute jobs are not arranged that far in advance, it would likely not even be possible for them to provide this information. She chooses not to apply for SNAP rather than risk angering the staff of the schools and missing out on work because of it. Helen does not qualify for

SNAP benefits either, stating the reason is "because I worked all my life."

When I asked this question during the interviews I was really hesitant. In analyzing the data, I reflected on why this might be, as I do not think people should be ashamed if they use these benefits. I was "on food stamps" earlier in my adult life, I have friends and family members who rely on these benefits now, and I really do not have a problem with it. I wonder, though, if I stumbled over the question so much because I am so sensitive to the stigmatization of receiving SNAP benefits, to the point that I do not want to risk hurting someone by assuming they receive them. I was likely worried they are ashamed and would be embarrassed by my asking. But had I just asked the question, without stumbling on it so much, they probably would have been less embarrassed than they were due to the way I asked it.

Brenda said that the majority of their clients qualify for SNAP (her estimate was eight out of ten) and if they do not already receive these benefits, she gives them information and shows them how to apply. She stated that some elderly people do not want to apply because of the stigma, and some people who are newly in need of assistance do not want to take something from someone else that they believe needs it more than they do, though that is not how the program works. Brenda noted that some people have come back and told her receiving the SNAP benefits have made all the difference for them. She explained how the process of applying has been made easier with sites around the city where people can apply online or on paper. Jennifer stated that a lot of people receive food stamps, but that the working poor are mostly on their own.

I asked Brenda how long SNAP benefits last for most people, and though she

reported she had seen a rare case or two where someone could not use all of the benefits they received in a month because the amount was so large, she estimated that they last most people three weeks. The first week of the month is when benefits are loaded on the card, and because the benefits do not last the whole month for most people, they see an increased number of people seeking food at the pantry during the last and first weeks of each month. When I spoke with Erica before I began conducting the interviews, she also explained that the busiest times at the food pantry are the first and last weeks of the month. The DMARC Food Pantry Network no longer uses the word “emergency” in describing the pantries or the services provided. According to Brenda, many people see the food pantry order as a “supplement to what they already get” because their SNAP benefits run out every month before the end of the month and this is “how they have learned to get through the month.” This was a major finding of the studies by DMARC’s *MovetheFood* Initiative (2010, 2011): that across the city, clients of the food pantry network do not receive a large enough SNAP benefit to provide them with food for the entire month, and Berner et al. (2008:405) report, “There is growing evidence that food stamp recipients are not finding government assistance sufficient to meet the needs of their households.” Jennifer has witnessed this as well, stating that the food pantries have become a staple and that they see a lot of the same people every month. The women I interviewed fit into this category, as each of them pick up an order of food from the pantry nearly every month. The pantry also supplies personal care items, and people use this resource so that they do not have to spend their limited funds on these types of items.

While the levels of resourcefulness in addressing food security demonstrated by the women I spoke with and the other clients of WDMHS are admirable, I am left wondering how different the lives of these women and the community as a whole would be if they could afford the healthiest food and if it were easier to access. That resourcefulness could be applied elsewhere, and who knows what other problems, at the household or the community level, could then be solved?

Knowledge

There is a lot of knowledge among the women I interviewed, as evidenced above in the section discussing resourcefulness. However, the production and distribution of knowledge was a topic that came up a great deal in these conversations, as people are looking to learn more about food and nutrition as well as the food system and to share their knowledge about these topics with others. When I met with Erica, she suggested that it might be good to do some demonstrations with some of the less-familiar items from the co-op so that people could become more familiar with these foods. When this idea was presented during the interviews, one of the clients thought this was a great idea, while the rest commented that some people would probably benefit from classes like this, and Jennifer agreed. Another proposed educational piece would be a class on how to stretch food dollars and take shortcuts to make food tastier, more nutritious and more affordable, and building meals around what is received from the food pantry. Robin stated that some people would really benefit from a class like this, and Brenda thought it would go over well. Brenda also said that many people have never been

taught what good, healthy food is, and so she thinks the ISU Extension nutrition classes held onsite are a valuable resource, though she has never attended one of these classes. Jennifer, on the other hand, explained that people are resistant to the cooking and nutrition classes. Overall, the women I interviewed did not very enthusiastically embrace the idea of classes. However, this may be because Allison and Diane are already participating in a nutrition class, Helen receives her meals from the meal delivery service, and Diane and Robin already cook nearly all of their meals, so they probably do not see any benefit in participating in these classes.

Jennifer described a group of people who receive assistance from WDMHS that she has learned a lot from, and she would like to bring them in as a panel so that people could learn from their peers. As we discussed this more, we talked about the expert model and how people are resistant to that, with Jennifer admitting she also resists some kinds of learning and saying, "They feel like they don't need anybody to tell them what to eat." This could be another reason the women interviewed were less than enthusiastic about participating in cooking and nutrition classes. However, if it could come from peers in a similar situation, it would have a totally different feeling than an outsider coming in and "telling everyone what to eat." She spoke about people learning from and teaching one another about ways to improve their health and that she sees the co-op as a site for that type of learning. As Gaventa (1993:40) points out, "It is not enough simply to democratize access to existing information. Rather, fundamental questions must be raised about what knowledge is produced, by whom, for whose interests, and toward what ends." The production and sharing of knowledge Jennifer is referring to seems a fitting starting

point in answering these “fundamental questions.”

Allison has a strong understanding of what foods are good for her husband and why he should avoid other foods. Diane stated that she always asks Allison before she fixes something new. Helen, too, knows a lot about which foods are beneficial to her and which ones she should not eat, but she also relies a great deal on her daughter and granddaughter to help her with this. Jennifer noted a lack of knowledge about eating well among the majority of people, regardless of income level, and she is quite concerned about this, but she also mentioned how helpful it is to know someone you can ask questions of, whether an elder or another family member.

Brenda stressed that the way information is presented matters for the co-op's efforts at inclusivity. She talked about how the staff at the co-op should not make people feel stupid because they ask a question, but she also said she does not think this will happen, because the people that work there are kind and helpful. Jennifer suggested it would be helpful to be able to find information at the co-op about how nutrition is affected by different production practices or what foods are high in certain vitamins. She also felt it would be helpful if staff could offer to help customers walk through planning a meal and finding good ingredients, and that demonstrations in the store showing simple preparation of foods would be beneficial for everyone. Jennifer also talked about how people have to have a certain level of self-confidence in order to believe that they can learn something new.

The co-op has focused on using online media to share information, and this really defines who is able to learn about the co-op, and it likely excludes much of the

low-income population. Also, even though it is a really welcoming and friendly place, there are still elements of being an insider's club; for example, new customers or people who are not really interested in healthy food may not know what things are, why they are priced the way they are, what the benefits of different foods are, and what to do with them. The staff is quite helpful, but there is usually only one person working and some people may not be comfortable asking a question of a staff member the first time they walk in the store, so it would be easier if there were more educational pieces that customers could pick up or just look at while they are shopping.

An interesting exchange regarding desire for knowledge occurred when I asked Allison about the idea of an additional discount for low-income customers of the co-op, and she replied, "Why can't they just keep their prices down? So you don't have to have a discount." My answer was that the co-op is trying to find a way to pay farmers a fair price without overcharging customers, which she agreed with. However, she went on to say, "But why can't there be better ways to grow it so it doesn't cost so much? I just think the world's money hungry, and, and it shouldn't be that way. But it is, so there's nothing we can do about it." Later in the interview she asked me why good food is so expensive, and I did not have a short or simple answer for that question. In asking these questions, Allison is trying to further develop her understanding of the food system and, perhaps, of capitalism. Though I do not think such complex questions can or should be answered simply, I hope that in the future I can better engage in a dialogue if someone asks me such questions, as it would be beneficial for more people to talk about these topics. While

information about food and nutrition is becoming more abundant, it is also becoming increasingly complex and is often controlled by those standing to benefit (or lose) from its dissemination. Food insecurity is a certainly a matter of justice, but it is important to also consider who controls knowledge and information about food and the food system. As Rahman (1982 as cited in Gaventa 1993:31) stated,

The dominant view of social transformation has been preoccupied with the need for changing existing oppressive structures of relations in material production. But...by now, in most polarized countries, the gap between those who have social power over the process of knowledge generation – and those who have not – has reached dimensions no less formidable than the gap in access to means of physical production.... For improving the possibilities of liberation, therefore, these two gaps should be attacked, wherever feasible, simultaneously.

Power

Despite the levels of resourcefulness and knowledge discussed above, as well as the agency of the low-income community members, the interviews and meetings revealed some of the ways that power differentials are played out in the lives of the low-income community members. One example of this was Helen's struggles with the meal delivery programs. She spends a great deal of time and effort on just managing the food she receives, yet the provision of these meals is purportedly a service provided to her. She has complained about some of these struggles, but the problems have not been addressed, leaving her feeling like she just needs to make do with what they give her.

Another example of a power dynamic affecting the women I interviewed is revealed through a comparison of the clients' satisfaction with the food they receive from the food pantry and the WDMHS staff members' perceptions of that

satisfaction. In speaking about the food pantry orders, Diane said, "I mean they give us, like, brown rice and whole wheat pasta and stuff, but it's so much of it all the time, I mean, makes you feel like you have to eat it everyday in order to use it."

Diane and Allison shared with me that they do not like the canned fruit, and that the spaghetti sauce and pasta they receive is okay but they tire of that as well. Fresh produce is their favorite thing to receive from the pantry, but that is not something they receive regularly. When asked what they would like to see changed in the pantry orders, Allison responded, "More of a variety of stuff, but, it's free so you can't, you can't gripe about it." When I asked Helen what she likes about the food she receives from the pantry, her reply was, "Not too much." She told me that she likes the extras, such as eggs and vegetables, but that the pantry always supplies her with beans and corn, which she cannot eat, and that the bag of rice she receives is far too much for her. Robin listed the items she typically receives in the pantry order and stated that she does not like many of these items, but she finds a way to make use of them. There are a few things she enjoys in the order, especially the whole-wheat pasta, and she too would like to see more fresh vegetables.

When I asked Brenda and Jennifer what the clients like and do not like about the food they receive from the pantry, they said they do not hear very many complaints about it. Most people are happy to receive the food, they said, because it is at least something more than they had, and people can take out what they do not want. They explained that they do receive some complaints, but they commented that these were "not true" or that they come from "older cranky people who just want to gripe about something." Jennifer also said she believes that their

clients do not feel like they have a voice, explaining that even though WDMHS staff encourages them to fill out comment cards or bring up any issue they may have by speaking with a staff member, clients seldom do so. As I stated above, throughout the interviews, Jennifer and Brenda both exhibited that they view the clients they serve with respect and treat them kindly. However, it is important when trying to incorporate the voices of those who have less power than we do, to consider how we use that power, even subtly and inadvertently, in our interactions with them, and what we can do to shift the power differential in a significant way. In spite of the efforts of WDMHS to encourage feedback from the clients, it is clear that the women with whom I spoke have heard and internalized other messages – “beggars can’t be choosers” and the like – whether from individuals they have met, agencies where they have sought services in the past, or society as a whole, and counteracting this dominant discourse will require continuing concerted effort on the part of agencies and people who believe otherwise.

One of the co-op principles that Tallgrass embraces is, “Empowering members of the cooperative in democratic control.” Jennifer is really excited about becoming more involved in the co-op and in having a voice there. Most of the clients did not seem very interested in this, which I found unfortunate because one of the things I was hopeful about was that these interviews would be a starting point for people to become more involved in the co-op. I think it is wonderful that Jennifer wants to be more involved, and I agree with Erica, who, in a conversation early on in my project, suggested that it would be good to have representation on the board of the co-op from either the low-income population or WDMHS. Perhaps Jennifer or

Brenda will end up being that person, or maybe more people will become involved as we move forward in further developing the relationship between Tallgrass and WDMHS.

Food sovereignty

The final piece of my analysis seeks to address my research question of whether the efforts of the grocery cooperative to create an environment that welcomes local low-income community members to be involved in the organization can be considered an attempt to move toward food sovereignty. At its core, the concept of food sovereignty assumes that people have a right to food, a right to the power to decide what food will be grown, and a right to grow that food. Is the food sovereignty movement broad enough to include people who are not addressing the production side of the food system? Should eaters have sovereignty over the kinds of food that they eat? There are many people who do not want to grow their own food or who do not have the opportunities or means to participate in the food system in this way, but they may still have a very clear vision of the kinds of food they would like to be able to eat.

When I asked the low-income women in what ways they would change their food landscape – the foods that they have access to and the means of acquiring it – most of the answers were fairly straightforward: healthier, more affordable, more variety, and more availability. The other answer, “You know, I’d like to be able to just sit down to my mama’s cooking sometime and just eat, but, and not worry about everything so much, you know?” came from a woman who is weary of the

complexities of her health conditions and the food created by the industrial food system and would just like to have simple, delicious food. Is there room in the nascent food sovereignty movement in the United States for these voices?

Holt-Giménez and Wang (2011:90) state that the aims of the food sovereignty movement in the United States are “to dismantle global markets and the monopoly power of corporations at local, national, and international scales, and [to advocate] redistributing and protecting productive assets such as seeds, water, land, and processing and distribution facilities.” While Carney (2012) calls for a direct and explicit link between movements for local control on the production side and food insecure populations on the consumption side of the food system, and Block et al. (2012) discuss the commonalities between food insecure populations and the farmers of *Vía Campesina*, others (Alkon and Mares 2012; Allen and Wilson 2008; Fairbairn 2012) argue that food sovereignty efforts must explicitly oppose the dominant industrial model, its neoliberal underpinnings, and the inequities it creates.

This project could not be considered to meet the substantial aims described by Holt-Giménez and Wang (2011), but it is an example of the type described by Carney (2012), as Tallgrass Grocery, with its focus on locally grown products and its place as a cooperative business, is attempting to directly and explicitly link its efforts with the local food insecure population. This project is outside of the dominant model, but I do not think it could be considered as being directly opposed to that model or to its neoliberal underpinnings. Perhaps it can rather be considered a “microresistance” to the dominant model, with potential to someday be fully a part of the food sovereignty movement.

In this chapter I have detailed my analysis of interviews and conversations I took part in during this project. I discussed feelings about food expressed by the interviewees, the values they discussed as well as the organizational values of West Des Moines Human Services and Tallgrass Grocery and my own values related to this project, challenges these women face in relation to food and beyond, their resourcefulness, considerations of knowledge and power, and finally an analysis of this project as a move toward food sovereignty. In the next chapter, I will summarize my key findings, discuss limitations of this research and topics for future research it suggests, and relate my final thoughts on the project.

Chapter 5. Conclusions

In this chapter, I provide my conclusions regarding this research project and the conclusion to this thesis. My major findings from the study begin the chapter, including the information I plan to share with Tallgrass Grocery Co-op and West Des Moines Human Services. I then discuss the limitations of this research, followed by a consideration of the questions that were answered by this study and those that remain, and I close the chapter with my concluding thoughts.

Major findings

This research project allowed me to learn a great deal about the relationship between Tallgrass Grocery Co-op and the low-income population of the community in which it is situated. Emotions and feelings about food surfaced repeatedly during the conversations. Many of the women I talked to related fond memories of meals and dishes they shared with their families growing up or that they cooked for their children when they were younger, or they discussed the pleasure of enjoying a favorite food today. There were also negative emotions associated with food, as they described the work involved in feeding their families on top of working outside the home and the struggle to afford food that is both healthy and enjoyable. One of the most compelling findings regarding emotions and food was the frequency of expressions of ambivalence. The interviewees talked about how delicious certain foods were and then went on to lament the fact that they should not eat them for health reasons. One woman spoke with pride about how well she had taken care of her family, preparing all of their meals, even when she was to be out of town for

work. At the same time, she expressed frustration at the fact that her husband did not know how to cook and provided, therefore, very little help to her.

In addition to emotions and feelings, another major area of findings from this project is around values. Much of what we do and how we think about food is influenced by our values, and this came out in every interview as well as in many of the meetings with people from Tallgrass. Most of the women I spoke with highly value health and nutrition, but whether or not this is their highest priority depends on a number of factors. For most people who have low incomes, stretching money as far as possible is necessarily quite important. Moreover, for those whose lives are very busy, convenience is highly valued. How these values manifest and interact in the lives of low-income community members is an important area of consideration when working to increase their access to healthy food. Along with the individual and personal values discussed in the interviews, the organizational values of Tallgrass and WDMHS shape the experience of people involved with these organizations, and these were also examined. Tallgrass's organizational values include providing local, fresh, in-season, and healthy products at prices that are fair to both the producers and the consumers. The organizational values of WDMHS that came through most strongly were viewing and working with clients in a respectful way and focusing on the present and doing what they can for each individual, rather than being overwhelmed by the magnitude of need in the community and beyond. My own beliefs and values regarding food, community, and justice, including the belief that access to healthy food is a human right, also came out in the decisions I made about the subject and approach used in this project and in many of the discussions in

which I took part. In order to create policies and programming that benefit the community members with low incomes, I believe it is important to speak with people who can represent this population and that this must be done in an open and honest way, and this belief guided my approach to this project. I learned, however, that it is crucial to establish trust with a population at the beginning of a project, as this will greatly affect people's level of engagement in that project. All of these findings suggest that values will likely be a part of every discussion and project relating to food security and that it is wise to make them a part of, rather than trying to keep them separate from, these discussions.

Another of my major findings was that individuals with low incomes face a number of challenges related to food, some due to system-level constraints and others due to matters at the individual level, including health concerns related to food; the cost of food, especially nutritious foods; time spent on procuring and preparing food; a desire for convenient foods, which may spring from lack of time, energy for planning, and/or a lack of knowledge about, skills necessary for, or desire to spend their time and energy cooking. Additionally, these challenges relating to food occur in the context of other challenges, such as living on a fixed income (Social Security or disability), employment concerns, paying for housing and utilities, and medical conditions. While these challenges may be things with which many people struggle, they are often exacerbated for people who have low incomes, as they have a smaller financial buffer for emergencies, and many of these challenges are cyclical and build upon each other. The responses of the women I interviewed suggest that were these challenges not present, they would eat greater quantities of

healthy food, as they all expressed a desire to have greater access to nutritious food.

Through this study, I also learned about the great deal of resourcefulness exhibited by the women I interviewed. Though they face the many challenges discussed above, they have found and crafted ways to meet those challenges. For instance, many of the women I talked to and other clients the outreach workers spoke about make use of multiple sources of food, picking up an order at the food pantry, going to the local farmers' market to treat themselves to fresh produce, and bargain hunting among different grocery stores and superstores for deals on staples. Some of the women explained to me how they made use of free or subsidized foods they received, even if they did not particularly care for the foods. Another strategy that was discussed is making a small change or addition to a recipe or a packaged food to make it healthier or tastier.

My findings regarding knowledge and education were also quite compelling. While there is an abundance of information available about food and nutrition, it can be very difficult to sort through. The interviewees indicated that they would like more information about the food that is available at the co-op, including nutritional information as well as recipes and tips on how to prepare this food. These suggestions are similar to feedback that co-op staff members have received from other customers about a need for more information. Though most of the women I talked to are comfortable with cooking, they believed that other community members who have low incomes might benefit from classes on cooking and nutrition, specifically around ways to make use of the food pantry items they receive in order

to stretch their food and food budget and to make food that is more nutritious and enjoyable. One of the outreach workers suggested that a panel led by members of the low-income community would be beneficial and perhaps better received by fellow low-income community members, and this aligns well with the literature around participatory knowledge production.

During the interviews and meetings I attended, I was able to observe some of the ways power plays out in the lives of the interviewees. One example was the woman who receives meals from a meal delivery service and spends so much of her time and effort, which she should be “saving” because of the meal delivery system, on dealing with the dysfunction of this system. Another example of a power dynamic in action was the difference between the feedback I received about the food pantry and the feedback the outreach workers reported hearing. By listening to them talk about the complaints that they do receive and considering the dominant discourse in our society around people receiving assistance, I was able to better understand why some people might hesitate to offer feedback, especially negative feedback. This led to the conclusion that those with power in the food system must be diligent in their efforts to share this power.

The personal responses of the women I interviewed lead to structural questions about the food system. Their lived experiences of the food system and its inequities make clear how the food system more readily provides food that is not only unhealthy, but often undesirable, for people with low incomes. Studies of this type highlight that change can be initiated from anywhere in a system and that people who are interested in helping to bring about social change must begin by

working from where they are while always keeping the larger, structural issues and questions in mind as they work at the local level.

Reporting to Tallgrass Grocery Cooperative

There are a number of things I learned from speaking with the clients and outreach workers from West Des Moines Human Services that I can share with the board, membership committee, and staff of Tallgrass Grocery Co-op to help them in their efforts to be more inclusive of the local low-income population. Many of the women did not know about the co-op before they became aware of my project, and others thought it was for members only. These are both concerns that I have heard discussed in Tallgrass meetings, and it is important that the co-op continue to share information with the community about the store and who can shop there. The women I spoke with suggested reaching out to the non-English speaking community, inviting teachers from local schools to bring their students to Tallgrass for a field trip to learn about organic and healthy food, sharing information with city employees involved in the city's wellness program through a "lunch and learn" workshop, and connecting with other area organizations that share common interests, which could widen the co-op's network. Someone also suggested that Tallgrass place a flyer at WDMHS to let people know about its existence, location, and what is sold there, and to also let them know about any job openings that occur at the co-op. Some suggestions that took this idea of being inclusive even further were to create a slogan for Tallgrass that communicates the desire to be inclusive and to include representation from WDMHS or the low-income community on the Tallgrass board of

directors. It is also important that it be made clear that the co-op accepts SNAP EBT as a form of payment, and I will check with Tallgrass to see if they have a sign to hang up that states this or if they would like me to obtain one from the USDA.

The women I interviewed enjoyed learning about and visiting the co-op and had a lot of suggestions for how it could become more inclusive, though they expressed that it felt friendly and welcoming to them. Even though everyone I interviewed was impressed with what they saw during our tour of the store, for many of these women, cost is the biggest factor preventing them from shopping at Tallgrass. Knowing that the co-op does not have the financial flexibility to lower prices, however, there were several ideas raised for how this challenge could be dealt with. None of the low-income women I interviewed is in a position to purchase a membership, and so a program of some kind that would eliminate the accompanying fee would be a great place to start. However, the 5% member discount might not make a big enough difference to attract low-income residents. An additional discount of some type, coupons, or a referral program that rewards people for bringing in new members would be helpful. Some of the Tallgrass board members have discussed allowing members to donate their 5% discount to increase someone else's discount, and this might be a good way to cover the costs of an additional discount and make members feel more of a connection with their community. Several of the women felt it was very important that any program of this type be discreet, to ensure that it does not embarrass the people it was created to serve.

Another thing that came out of the interviews was that food pantry clients relish the fresh food and “extras” that they occasionally have access to at the food pantry. This includes the fresh produce and other less frequently donated items like milk and eggs. I will relate this enthusiasm to the people from Tallgrass so that they continue to donate to WDMHS any items that they are unable to sell but that are still edible. There might also be additional programming that could be done around this; for instance, an occasional or ongoing fresh (rather than canned) food drive where shoppers can purchase extras that can be distributed at the pantry. The co-op might also serve as a source for information for gardeners about donating extra produce or as an occasional sponsor of a meal at the community meal site. It was also suggested that the co-op carry affordable, healthy snacks, to serve as an alternative for people who may shop at a convenience store for snacks. The women I spoke with also mentioned expanding the variety of foods that are available at the co-op and including affordable staples so that people will always go the co-op to buy those items and then may find additional items they need or wish to try.

Finally, I will let Tallgrass know that people want to know more about the food that is available at the co-op. Areas of education could include information about the producers and the practices they employ to grow or raise the food, and in what ways these practices make the food more desirable, healthier, or less harmful to the environment. The women with low incomes I talked with also wanted to know more about nutrition, including which foods would be recommended for people with a specific medical condition or those who need a certain vitamin or nutrient. Furthermore, the interviewees indicated that there are many foods available at the

co-op with which they are unfamiliar. Tallgrass could provide simple recipes or demonstrations on how to prepare these foods and how to make a meal with these items, or they could incorporate items that are commonly included in the food pantry orders into a recipe to share with WDMHS.

Reporting to West Des Moines Human Services

I learned some things that would be valuable to share with West Des Moines Human Services as well. While some of this is out of the hands of WDMHS, I did receive some feedback about the quantities and types of food that are given out in the food pantry orders and, as they told me they rarely receive much feedback from the clients, I would like to share this with them. While sometimes this is a matter of food preference, there are also some pieces that go beyond that and would be worth sharing. Additionally, it seems there is a strong desire for education and increased knowledge around food. While I know that the on-site nutrition class does not have a large attendance, I would be interested to see how this might differ were some of the responsibility for facilitation of the class shared with clients of WDMHS. A next step will be to find ways to help some of the women I spoke with become community educators. Perhaps there would be other ways to share information with the clients as well, and I can discuss this with the staff members. People affiliated with Tallgrass and WDMHS have expressed interest in finding ways to build the relationship between the two organizations, and I plan to share this fact with both organizations and offer to help facilitate this growth.

Limitations of this research

One limitation of this project was the small number of people I was able to interview and that they, in many ways, constituted a fairly homogenous group. All of them are women, born in the United States, and of the same general age range. Additionally, each of them drove to the interview, which differentiates them in terms of the range of what is accessible from those who have to rely on public transportation or rides from others. Three out of the four low-income women eat home-cooked meals for nearly every meal, which probably makes them different from many of the other clients at WDMHS. This may, in part, be traced back to the rural roots shared by the same three women, who grew up learning to cook and to eat what was in the cupboard, which likely shaped their relationship with food. Another thing that sets these women apart from many of the clients of WDMHS is the fact that only one of them receives SNAP benefits, compared with Brenda's estimate that eighty percent of the people they see receive SNAP benefits. Brenda is the only woman I interviewed that has children living with her; none of the low-income interviewees do.

All of these women were willing to talk to me, which might not have been the case if they did not have an interest in healthy food or were resistant to this type of conversation. Though I scheduled each interview at the convenience of the interviewee, having time to sit down for an interview that lasted about an hour, including the tour of the co-op, is another way that my interviewees might differ from people that were not interviewed. I may have learned different things had I talked to individuals that differed from these women in terms of cultural backgrounds,

household composition, gender, age, or other characteristics. Challenges and values, as well as responses to the co-op, would likely have differed. An additional limitation of this project is that I chose to discuss the project to varying degrees with many of those interviewed prior to the interviews in order to help them understand why I was seeking their participation and to show them that I was trustworthy.

Because of this choice, the women I spoke with were aware of my background and my motivations, as well as my affiliation, as a volunteer and member, with Tallgrass, and this may have biased their responses.

Questions answered

This study gave some answers to my research question regarding what a cooperative grocery store can do to create a welcoming atmosphere that is an affordable alternative for local community members with low incomes. Through the Tallgrass board and committee meetings and the discussions and interviews with the clients and staff of West Des Moines Human Services, I was able to collect and vet a great number of ideas for policies and programming that the co-op could adopt to this end. Additionally, I learned about the atmosphere of Tallgrass and WDMHS, as well as more about the circumstances of the interviewees' lives. Not only can this information serve to shape future programming for both of these organizations, but it can also suggest areas to be explored in future research.

My research question about whether or not this project can be considered part of the movement for food sovereignty was partially answered by this research. Because there is no agreed-upon definition of food sovereignty in the United States

and, at this point, people are merely theorizing about what they believe must be included in order for something to be considered a part of the food sovereignty movement, I am unable to give a definitive answer to this second research question.

Remaining questions

There are several questions that remain and that could be explored in further research. One area that will continue to warrant exploration is the question of how to bridge the gap between fresh, healthy food and people with limited food budgets. Is it the role of private citizens and/or nonprofit organizations to bear the cost? And if the state will ultimately pay for the results of this gap in the form of medical costs, why not make an upfront investment? Or should these efforts instead be community-based and localized? Ideology aside, there is a great deal of research that could be conducted about the mechanics of bridging this gap, especially when viewed through a lens of social justice. Studies similar to this one conducted in different contexts or with interviewees that differ from those included here in a variety of ways – men or parents with children living at home, for example – could provide additional information to answer these questions.

Another question that warrants further exploration is that of knowledge production and distribution related to the food system and the role that power plays in these processes. There is clearly a great deal of information available about food, but by whom and for whom was this information produced? Who benefits from the distribution of this knowledge? How can explorations of these and other social

justice questions relating to the food system lead to a greater understanding of social justice issues beyond food?

Finally, there is a great deal of research to be done to further explore food sovereignty and what that concept means in the midst of the industrial agrifood system in the United States. Also, more research could be done on specific actions that are taken as a part of this movement, specifically by those who frame themselves as being directly opposed to the industrial model and the neoliberalism that holds that model in place. How are these groups defining themselves? And how will they work to grow the movement? These are just some of the areas where further important research could be conducted.

Final thoughts

With this participatory action research project I had hoped to find answers about ways that a grocery cooperative can be a more welcoming and inclusive place and organization for local low-income residents, and I have a long list of ideas to share with Tallgrass regarding that question. These ideas might also inform other similar organizations, but they are particularly meaningful to this community because this community generated them. I also wanted to determine whether such an endeavor could be considered part of the food sovereignty movement in the United States. While I did not find a definitive answer, it is possible that it may be clarified as more people join the food sovereignty movement in this country. Finally, I learned a great deal about how to approach these sorts of projects, and I will carry this into my future work in the food system. Particularly, two important concepts

were reinforced for me as I carried out and reflected upon this project. First, it is crucial that those working for social change continually reflect upon the values and assumptions they bring to that work and use these reflections to make their approach ever more just. And secondly, it is critical that social change be instigated and carried out from within a community and that these efforts should be sustained as part of a larger movement to improve the system and the lives of those most adversely affected by it.

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Appendix 1. Sample Interview Questions

Below is the list of sample questions I asked the low-income community members, though I adjusted the questions according to each conversation.

Can you tell me about a favorite food memory or tradition?

Where do you go to get food?

What are things that you like about acquiring food in each of those places, and what could be improved or what do you dislike about each place?

Do you receive SNAP benefits?

What were your impressions of the co-op?

Do you have any suggestions for things the co-op could do to be a welcoming and affordable place for low-income community members to get food? What do you think about each of these ideas? (Discounted, sponsored, or free membership; discount above 5% member discount; volunteer to earn a larger discount)

If there were no constraints, in what ways would you change your food landscape?

Below is the list of sample questions I asked the West Des Moines Human Services outreach workers, though I adjusted the questions according to each conversation.

In your experience, where do people that receive assistance from WDMHS acquire most of their food? Do they shop at farmers' markets or use community meal sites?

What do you think they like about these places? What do you think they dislike?

Do most of the people you work with receive SNAP benefits?

What do you think people would change about their food landscape if they could? Does this vary for different populations?

What do you see as barriers for low-income folks accessing healthy food? Transportation?

Do you perceive a stigma about receiving assistance? Does this vary for different segments of the population you serve or for different types of assistance?

What kind of feedback do you receive from people about the food they get from the food pantry? About food they get from other food sources?

Have you been to Tallgrass Grocery Co-op? What are your impressions?

Do you have any suggestions for things the co-op could do to be a welcoming and affordable place for low-income community members to get food? What do you think about each of these ideas? (Discounted, sponsored, or free membership; discount above 5% member discount; volunteer to earn a larger discount)

Do you think people would be interested in attending nutrition or cooking classes or classes where they learned about using the foods available at the co-op? Is there a lack of knowledge of these things or are there other barriers?

Appendix 2. Key Themes from Data Analysis

Challenges related to food

Cooking, convenience, planning, and time

Cost of food

Health concerns

Healthy food affordability and accessibility

Feelings related to food

Ambivalent

Negative

Positive

Food in context of other challenges

Ideas for Tallgrass Grocery Co-op

Knowledge

Power

Reflexivity

Resourcefulness

Tallgrass Grocery Co-op – organization

Values

Appendix 3. Update on Tallgrass Grocery Co-op

In August 2012, Tallgrass Grocery Co-op closed. The board of directors had reached out to the members on several occasions over the course of the prior five months to ask for their help and support, in the form of shopping at the co-op and also in the form of member loans. The board explained that the co-op did not grow in terms of memberships or member engagement in the ways it needed to in order to be financially solvent. They cited the lack of sales as the reason that the co-op had to close less than one year after it had opened.

The co-op closed after I had written and defended this thesis. In light of its closing, though, I was unable to work with the co-op to implement any of the policy and programming recommendations discussed and did not have much of an opportunity to help West Des Moines Human Services and Tallgrass continue to build upon their relationship. However, I still intend to share my findings with the staff members I worked with from WDMHS as well as the women with low incomes who I interviewed, both to ensure the validity of these findings and, if possible, to use them to inform future action. Additionally, I will take what I learned from this project and use it in my food system work going forward, and I hope to work with WDMHS and the other DMARC food pantries in the future to continue to increase access to fresh, healthy food for their clients.