

The food movement: Growing white privilege, diversity, or empowerment?

COMMENTARY ON RACE AND
ETHNICITY IN FOOD SYSTEMS WORK

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Abstract

Food systems work is both a stimulus to the growth of the food movement and a response to the concerns of the activists who lead and participate in that movement. In the United States and many other nations, the development of a vocal, articulate, and passionate group of people who are critical of food systems work has led to many changes. However, the food movement lacks diversity representative of the communities in which food systems work takes place. People of color, the poor, and many ethnic and religious minorities remain almost invisible in the food

movement. A diversity model approach to food systems work would suggest that the food movement should include people of diverse backgrounds and characteristics, reflect the needs and interests of a diverse society, and respect everyone's food choices and values in determining solutions and creating alternatives to the current food system. Instead, the food movement most often reflects white, middle class interests, and ignores or even rejects the interests and cultural histories of diverse populations when establishing what constitutes "good food." We call for an empowerment model that instead embraces diversity and respects the variability in food choices and values within our society. We argue this model will liberate both the underrepresented and underserved *and* the elite and that the result will be more equitable and lasting solutions to complex social problems in the food system.

Keywords

diversity model, empowerment model, food movement, white privilege, ladder of participation

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Food systems work is both a stimulus to the growth of the food movement and a response to the concerns of the activists who lead and participate in that movement. The increased effort to understand and improve the food system both globally and in the United States is valuable to consumers, farmers, and other actors in the food system. It has spurred an ongoing discussion of the strengths and weaknesses and also the successes and failures of the large-scale, global systems of production and marketing that developed in the late 20th century. In the United States and many other nations, the development of a vocal, articulate and passionate group of people who are critical of food systems work has led to many changes. The growth of farmers' markets, increased research on sustainable and organic production techniques, and growing demand for fresh fruits and vegetables are just a few of the noticeable changes that have resulted. However, we argue that the work on food systems, with few exceptions, has not been able to incorporate a diversity model.

What Would a Diversity Model Look Like?

At the most basic level, implementing a diversity model would require that the food movement and those of us engaged in food systems work include actors who represent the full diversity of the societies of which we are a part. One important indicator of the degree to which diverse actors are engaged fully is their participation not just as "beneficiaries" or "advocates" but as leaders of the food movement. People of color, the poor, and many ethnic and religious minorities remain almost invisible in the food movement. The membership of the food movement, those who advocate and work on food systems, and certainly the high-visibility leaders of the movement in the U.S. remain largely white, of "Anglo" heritage, and middle class. Nor is the diversity of the nation reflected in the land-grant colleges and universities that receive the lion's share of federal funds for food systems research and extension. The National Research Council (2009) issued an assessment of agricultural education in the U.S. that specifically called for greater diversity in the faculty and student body at these institutions. The Association of Public and Land-grant Universities (APLU) (2009)

echoed the NRC recommendations.

A diversity model also requires that food systems work address the needs of the diverse groups of people in our societies. We have greatly increased the attention we pay to alternative modes of production, distribution, and marketing of foods. For example, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) now funds research and outreach on organic food production and has programs designed to provide training and assistance for new or beginning farmers and ranchers. However, organic foods are neither affordable nor accessible by the poor. Food systems workers have recognized these limitations, but much of the work to increase the quality of foods available to food insecure people has focused on gardening. In essence, this involves telling the poor to "raise your own food," ignoring the cost in time and money and the high risk of crop loss inherent in gardening, especially for the inexperienced. Attention to the "whiteness" of the food movement and food systems work has grown in recent years (Alkon, 2012; Alkon & Agyeman, 2011; Billings & Cabbil, 2011; Bowens, 2015; Etmanski, 2012; Freeman, 2013; Guthman, 2008; Slocum, 2006). The APLU also issued a report (2010) that called for greater diversity in Cooperative Extension as an organization and in regard to the diverse needs of the American public.

To improve food systems work, it is useful to think about the implications that a diversity model would have for the food movement and food systems work that supports it. A diversity model would respect *everyone's food*. Intentionally or not, the food movement has defined for many people what constitutes good food. Some aspects of the definition are science-based and hard to challenge. Foods loaded with fat, sugar, and salt are not nutritionally good foods. However, for many in the food movement good food also includes intangible attributes; typical examples are organic, local, GMO-free, from a small farm, heritage cultivars, and free range. In and of themselves, these attributes represent food choices that certainly reflect values. However, this "labeling" extends beyond differences in values expressed in open discourse. The white privilege reflected in the composition of the food movement membership, and especially its

leadership, extends to what constitutes “good food” in many cases. One example is the “collards versus kale war.” Collards and kale are essentially equivalent nutritionally. Collard greens are a typical Southern food, a food choice shared by both black and white southerners. Yet kale has become the poster child for “really good food,” while collards are virtually absent from the food discourse. A negative image of collard greens as “overcooked with too much salt and lard” reflects a judgment of Southern, and more specifically traditionally African American, foods and indirectly of the people who prepare and eat them.

A more inclusive approach to food systems work could be based on Arnstein’s model of the “ladder of participation.” Arnstein (1969) divides “participation” into eight categories. At the bottom of the ladder are manipulation and therapy, where participants are essentially “subjects.” The middle levels of participation include informing, consultation, and placation. The highest levels are partnership, delegated power, and citizen control. If we apply her model to food systems work today, we can see that progress has occurred. The discussion of the need to include people of color, to meet the needs of the food insecure, and the increasing interest in foods not traditional to the U.S. and Western European diet all point to opportunities for a broader participation in food systems work. However, a critical self-examination may lead to the conclusion that the food movement has not yet moved beyond placation, a form of tokenism in Arnstein’s hierarchy.

The Need for an Empowerment Model

As food system workers and food movement advocates and representatives, we have become more sensitive to the *need to embrace diversity*, but most of us probably remain trapped by the dominance of our white, middle-class experience *as a group* that prevents us from fully understanding the meaning of “embracing diversity.” Nonetheless, our work takes place in a system that is itself a product of white privilege, both historically and today. We can move from “therapy,” solving the problem “our way,” to consultation and even placation. For example, most of us will intellectually reject the idea that race has anything to do with

how “good” and “not good” foods are defined. We welcome and seek out the participation of people of color, the poor, and ethnic and religious minorities in our work. However, we are deeply challenged when we try to move beyond “welcoming others to the movement” to “welcoming and participating in multiple movements,” some of which are quite different in content, approach and form from our own. Ultimately, diversity is critical to the sustainability of the global food system because no single set of solutions, created under a single cultural and social system, is likely to produce the range of ideas and approaches needed to create lasting and evolving solutions to the challenges of feeding 9 billion people good food.

Diversity is not a nicety or “simply” a social desirable condition. Diversity is essential to creativity and the ability to engage in critical self-examination. An empowerment model may well be a more appropriate one to create diverse and transformative food systems work. Empowerment moves beyond an emphasis on diversity for its own sake to focus on the necessity of learning from and incorporating the full range of human experiences to develop equitable and lasting solutions to complex social problems. Empowerment is both an individual and a group process. Like our efforts to incorporate diversity, it does give voice to the underrepresented and underserved. Ultimately, however, a successful empowerment model for food systems work opens resources, authority, and power to those who have been denied opportunities to control their own lives (Burdick, 2014; Kojolo, 2013; Naylor, 2012; Rodriguez, 2011). It provides an environment in which diverse groups create a mosaic of solutions that they share and respect, even when the solutions reflect different values, cultures, and traditions (Fagan & Stevenson, 2002; Gollub, Cyrus-Cameron, Armstrong, Boney, & Chhatre, 2013; Leerlooijer, Bos, Ruiters, van Reeuwijk, Rijsdijk, Nshakira, & Kok, 2013).

The role of traditional power elites in a food movement and in food systems work built on an empowerment model undergoes transformation. It changes from one of arbiter of norms, agenda setting, and leadership to one of supporter and advocate of solutions that may differ greatly from one’s own. One of the most important aspects of an

empowerment model for development work of all types is that it liberates both the underrepresented and underserved *and* the elite. The ability to share fully in creating solutions that are not “of one’s own experience” is transformational (Kriner, Coffman, Adkisson, Putman, & Monaghan, 2015).

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