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Solidarity and sweat equity: For reciprocal food justice research

COMMENTARY ON RACE AND
ETHNICITY IN FOOD SYSTEMS WORK

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Abstract

Researchers committed to food justice often enter communities and nonprofits with a desire to help. They often think there is a scarcity, such as food, that they want to understand and help to increase. At the same time, research obligations may lead to extracting “findings” without advancing food justice. Such actions may unintentionally work against food justice, especially the goal of dismantling structural inequalities and advancing social equity. This commentary chronicles the ongoing and incomplete process by which I have carried out food justice research and worked toward food justice. In short, reciprocal research requires working *with*, not *for*, organizations and communities. This entails ongoing acts of

solidarity. One way to express this is through flexibility with research goals in order to tailor all or parts of one’s project to answer questions that increase understanding of how to challenge structural inequalities and advance social equity. Relatedly, openness to how food justice activists and organizations confront the food movement and society more broadly to address whiteness, privilege, racial inequality, and notions of diversity can enrich critical social science. Of equal importance is sweat equity. Most food justice activists and organizations have few resources and cannot serve the whims of researchers. Therefore, providing labor is an important allied act. This increases the researchers’ empathy with activists, organizations, and communities, and creates opportunities to build trust and dissolve social boundaries. To enter into a situation that deepens our knowledge of the food justice movement *and* advances food justice requires solidarity and sweat equity.

Keywords

allyship, anti-oppression, anti-racism, food studies, food movement, food justice, methodology, public sociology, solidarity, sweat equity

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Author note: Joshua Sbicca’s research focuses on the contentious politics of food and agriculture, social movements, and inequalities. This currently includes investigations into food labor and land use politics and the economic and social conditions of coalition development in the food movement.

In the fall of 2008, I found myself on the phone with Brahm Ahmadi, then executive director of People's Grocery, a well-known food justice organization in West Oakland, California. I was a graduate student in the Department of Sociology and Criminology & Law at the University of Florida who wanted to write a master's thesis on the food justice movement. After attending university and working in the San Francisco Bay area for six years, building community and social movement ties in many places and seeing friends link food to social justice, I was inspired to return from the swamplands of Florida for fieldwork. When Brahm asked why I wanted to learn about People's Grocery, I told him that it was one of the only organizations I could find deliberately using food justice to explain its work. I wanted to know how they linked food, as an environmental benefit, to fights for social justice in a place with a long history of labor, black power, and environmental justice movements. Brahm told me that while my question was important, he wanted to know that the time I would take away from People's Grocery for interviews would somehow benefit the organization. Thus began a journey to learn about the merits of sweat equity and the necessary acts of solidarity required to do research with resource-strapped organizations in low-income communities of color.

For the next year, I became an interlocutor, translating my experiences and those of interns and volunteers that were part of People's Grocery's "allyship" into words reflecting the anti-oppression framework guiding the organization. My conversation with Brahm ended with him noting that the organization wanted to know how their allyship program was working, what interns and volunteers thought about their role in the organization, and whether this translated into deeper community engagement. Therefore, along with a set of my own questions, these organizational needs shaped the direction of my research. Whereas I had sought to describe how this pioneering organization understood food justice, I instead came away with an appreciation of the opportunities and obstacles faced by food justice organizations adopting an anti-oppression framework (Sbicca, 2012).

Flexibility and openness are basic modes of

solidarity from which researchers can build relationships with potential collaborators and respondents. Flexibility during early stages of research development is important if one hopes to gain the trust of activists and organizations engaged in the daily tasks of movement building. This is especially true if one is asking for interviews or surveys, requesting participants to draw maps or take photographs, or engaging in any other time-intensive qualitative method. Food justice activists, like many activists, are working on a shoestring budget. Coupled with the entrenched social inequalities facing low-income communities of color and the perceived immediacy of problems such as hunger, poverty, and mass incarceration, researchers must recognize how activists might see their work as less important. When one is an outsider with few or no previous ties, remaining open to organizational or community needs can signal sensitivity to the challenges of combating institutionalized racism and cultivating a commitment to food justice in the food movement. We may want to parachute in with a tidy set of questions and then scramble away once we arrive at answers, but this would be to the detriment of future scholar/activist collaborations. Strictly extractive models of research, then, undermine the social change potential of more reciprocal relationships.

Openness to the questions food justice activists and organizations ask about their own work and the critical role they play in pushing the food movement to address whiteness, privilege, racial inequality, and notions of diversity sets up the researcher to play a supportive role. This also positions the researcher to broadcast more widely some of the strategies used by the food justice movement to challenge colonialism, institutionalized racism, racial inequality, and discrimination, and to build alliances across race and class lines. The venues where a researcher shares these strategies may include academic and popular journals and magazines, newspapers, organizational newsletters, webcasts, blogs, and/or talks given at churches, schools, food justice organizations, and food policy councils. The point is that the researcher is in a key strategic position, a position of privilege they can use to advance racial equity.

For example, my time with People's Grocery included attendance at a required anti-oppression training. At the outset of this training, a facilitator noted that food justice could be broken down between "food," which entails cultivating and growing, and "justice," which represents the larger struggle. In essence, the purpose of the training was to cultivate and grow the struggle for social justice. The group in attendance agreed upon a set of rules to create a safe space for the day. The facilitator wrote these up on a number of large easel pads: No judgment; step up and step back; one mic; speak in order; what is said here, stays here; no assumptions about people's identity; bring things up in love; "I" statements instead of "you" statements; stay open-minded to others. After this, we went through an activity called "Community Tree," which began with the group listing problems in West Oakland. These included unemployment, pollution, the number of liquor stores and lack of grocery stores, gentrification, empty lots and foreclosures, drug use and alcoholism, health problems, poor schools, and lack of public facilities. We then listed causes, such as institutionalized racism, the white dominant culture's ability to define other cultures, inequality in the justice system, redlining, capitalism, city officials, unequal distribution of resources, polluting industry, and how the Gold Rush brought people who displaced the Ohlone tribe in the Bay Area. The idea behind making these connections was to point out the structural nature of many social problems intersecting with the work of the food justice movement. We then free-associated solutions like building community, alliances, and a local economy, empowerment, reshaping the environment, creating space for community voice, shifting power, drawing upon community assets, public policy, and education. In addition to these power mapping and solution-generation exercises, we investigated our own privileges, role-played scenarios we might encounter while working with People's Grocery, listened to a talk about what it means to fight for food justice, and came up with one concrete way we were going to live out working as an ally.

For me, working as an ally means leveraging my privilege to support food justice work as a white male professor at a large public university

with many resources. This requires active listening, reflection, and patience in order to resist reproducing asymmetrical power relationships between academia and the food justice movement (Bradley and Herrera 2015). Practice as a graduate student was central to helping me adjust what this looks like depending on the context. I found that People's Grocery offered a powerful anti-oppression framework for building food justice allies, but volunteers and interns understood this differently depending on their social position and previous life experiences. In the years following my allyship, leaders deepened the program by including a regular anti-oppression reading group, which created a space to work through becoming an ally. The reflexive space interviews offered people to think about how to improve their work and informal conversations about movement building while gardening alongside staff and interns enriched the process of making this organizational change. Although a small modification, it led me to believe that researchers can foster reciprocity and active solidarity with food justice organizations.

Sweat equity is another way researchers can build trust. My experience as an unpaid intern at People's Grocery, which included working in urban gardens and a small farm, led me to the conclusion that providing labor is an important act as an ally. When planning my doctoral dissertation, I took into account how food organizations perceive the costs of granting access to researchers. Because I wanted to embed myself with their daily work, I knew that I could not just sit in a corner and scribble notes about what I was witnessing. I had to work with people on their projects and campaigns. Because the three organizations I based my dissertation on sought to improve the food system in distinct ways, I had to meet each organization where they were at and lend my labor where they saw fit. This included paying to attend organic farming workshops, and farming alongside interns and volunteers with San Diego Roots Sustainable Food Project; building edible landscapes, designing surveys, and canvassing with Planting Justice; and recruiting community partners for Black Friday strikes against Wal-Mart, attending protests, and writing a briefing on the All-China Federation of Trade Unions for United Food and Commercial


Workers Local 770.

Beyond the practical benefits of providing labor in whatever ways were most useful to organizations, there were prefigurative benefits. These benefits emerged through the process of working across social boundaries, reflecting in interviews on the race dynamics of the organization, and changing individual and organizational practices accordingly. Each organization had different race, class, and gender dynamics, which to dissect in any depth is beyond the scope of this commentary (for more, see Myers & Sbicca, 2015; Sbicca, 2014, 2015a, 2015b). The point I want to make is that the role that a researcher plays as ally is contingent on the needs of the organization as well as the economic, political, and social context. In one instance, my role was to ask pointed questions about an organization's relationship to a local low-income community of color, which had the unintended consequence of starting conversations about organizational diversity and the problems of color-blind programming. In another instance, my role was to build gardens with formerly incarcerated men, all of whom were black, listen to their experiences, offer help when asked, and relay their stories to a food movement happy to buy prison-produced tilapia at Whole Foods, but afraid of the stereotype Kathryn Russell Brown (2009) refers to as the "criminalblackman." In the final instance, my role was to support the confrontational political tactics driven by low-income communities and communities of color such as strikes, protests, and lobbying. Thus, sweat equity is not an instrumental tool to gain research access, but a means by which to prefigure anti-oppressive scholar/activist ties capable of challenging structural inequalities, and advancing diversity within the food movement and racial equity in the food system.

Food justice research devoid of praxis will not empower low-income communities and communities of color or advance racial equity. This is especially the case when research perpetuates moralist and colonizing practices that elevate the scholar above the activist and ignore the situated knowledge of communities of color (Bradley and Herrera 2015). Alternatively, food justice research can be a means to enrich relationships, start conversations, strategize solutions, and create

institutions to advance food justice while contesting those that do not. To do food justice would require at a minimum, as Cadieux and Slocum (2015) suggest, confronting and acknowledging historical trauma and inequity, developing autonomous and community-controlled exchange systems, creating non-, anti-, and despite-capitalist relationships with land, and pursuing fair labor practices. This requires an initial and then ongoing acts of solidarity. Paulo Freire (2000) put it this way:

Solidarity requires that one enter into the situation of those with whom one is solidary; it is a radical posture... True solidarity with the oppressed means fighting at their side to transform the objective reality which has made them these "beings for another." The oppressor is solidary with the oppressed only when he stops regarding the oppressed as an abstract category and sees them as persons who have been unjustly dealt with, deprived of their voice, cheated in the sale of their labor—when he stops making pious, sentimental, and individualistic gestures and risks an act of love. True solidarity is found only in the plenitude of this act of love, in its existentiality, in its praxis. To affirm that men and women are persons and as persons should be free, and yet to do nothing tangible to make this affirmation a reality, is a farce. (pp. 49–50)

Sweat equity is one of the chief principles that can guide researchers to "enter into the situation." Once present, this principle requires ongoing support for the food justice movement, a process predicated on active listening and strategic action while also doing research. 

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