



People and places shaping food procurement among recipients of Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)



Madalena F. Monteban^{a,*}, Kimberly D. Bess^b, Colleen C. Walsh^c, Heather Baily^d, Susan A. Flocke^a, Elaine A. Borawski^a, Darcy A. Freedman^a

^a Case Western Reserve University, School of Medicine, Prevention Research Center for Healthy Neighborhoods, BioEnterprise Building, Room 443, 11000 Cedar Avenue, Cleveland, OH 44106, USA

^b Vanderbilt University, Department of Human and Organizational Development, Peabody #90, 230 Appleton Place, Nashville, TN 37203-5721, USA

^c Cleveland State University, School of Health Sciences, 2121 Euclid Ave. IM 115, Cleveland, OH 44115, USA

^d Case Western Reserve University, Department of Anthropology, Mather Memorial Room 238, 11220 Bellflower Road, Cleveland, OH 44106-7125, USA

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ABSTRACT

A key gap in existing food environment research is a more complex understanding of the interplay between physical and social contexts, including the influence of social networks on food habits. This mixed methods research examined the nature of social connections at food procurement places among a sample of 30 people receiving Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits in an urban setting. Results highlight the significance of social connections as motivators to use food places, the value of access to information and other resources at food places, and the role of weak ties with actors within food places to facilitate utilization and interaction. Social connections at the varied places individuals procure food may be leveraged to disseminate information and resources to further healthy food access.

1. Introduction

Food and nutrition are understood as embedded within socio-cultural traditions of households and communities (Counihan, 1999; Delormier et al., 2009; Story et al., 2008). While socio-cultural traditions are often invoked in relation to food preparation and consumption, the sociality of food procurement is often overlooked. We use the term food procurement to describe the acquisition of food at both retail and non-retail (e.g., emergency food assistance) locations. There is an emerging body of research aimed at understanding how physical environments shape procurement, however, less attention has been paid to the impact of social environments on food procurement behaviors (Caspi et al., 2012; Walker et al., 2010). Research suggests food procurement is interwoven with social roles, relationships, status, and needs (Munoz-Plaza et al., 2013), yet few studies examine the complexity of these social factors (Nam et al., 2015). To address this gap, we examined social relationships that exist between people at food procurement places among a sample of parents and caregivers receiving Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits.

Our focus on food procurement aligns with public health strategies aimed at promoting healthy diets. Poor diet quality is a primary risk factor for some chronic diseases (Boeing et al., 2012; Murray et al.,

2013; Willett and Stampfer, 2013). Low-income Americans (Wang et al., 2014) and minority populations experience greater inequities related to diet quality and chronic disease and these disparities are particularly high for African American women (Flegal et al., 2010). Our focus on SNAP recipients aligns with emerging research centered on this sub-group of low-income consumers for three reasons: 1) they suffer worse diet quality compared to income eligible non-participants (Leung et al., 2013, 2012), 2) the mode of payment with SNAP benefits influences where SNAP benefits can be utilized (Jones and Bhatia, 2011; Zenk et al., 2011), and 3) the mode of payment also influences interactions within food procurement establishments (Haynes-Maslow et al., 2015). We focused on parents and caregivers because this group represents the largest sub-group of SNAP recipients. In 2015, the year of data collection for the present study, 43% of SNAP recipients were families with children (U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2016). Moreover, shopping habits of families with children have unique constraints influencing procurement ranging from time costs to taste preferences (Skinner et al., 2002). Additionally, food procurement for families with children has an impact on multiple people (i.e., adults and children in the household).

A key community-level strategy to improve diet quality is to increase access to healthy food in neighborhoods through changes to the

* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: madamonteban@gmail.com (M.F. Monteban).

physical food environment. The development of supermarkets or farmers' markets in areas where access to healthy foods is limited (i.e., food deserts) are examples of strategies to improve the physical food environment (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2011; U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2013). The assumption is that proximity to healthy food procurement options will contribute to healthier eating. However, research has found conflicting results regarding the impact of these strategies on consumer behavior. For instance, two separate studies found opening a supermarket in food desert neighborhoods resulted in limited changes in food procurement behaviors or diet (Cummins et al., 2005; Dubowitz et al., 2015). However, a few farmers' market intervention studies demonstrate modest dietary improvements (Evans et al., 2012; Freedman et al., 2013a).

There is growing interest in examining social interactions that occur at food procurement places in addition to physical factors such as proximity (Hillier et al., 2011; Travers, 1996). The sociality of food procurement is recognized as a common motivator for consumers' shopping behaviors (Arnold and Reynolds, 2003; Cicatiello et al., 2015; Rintamäki et al., 2006). Research by Cannuscio et al. (2014) on social dynamics of shopping behaviors suggests people choose to shop at stores frequented by people of similar race, ethnicity, income, and education, and where they had positive interactions with personnel and proprietors. Much of this type of research is focused on farmers' markets as spaces that promote meaningful social interaction (Carson et al., 2016; Cicatiello et al., 2015; Sommer et al., 1981) and how the exchange of information can influence food behaviors. Sommer et al. (1981) showed the number of social and informative interactions (those that require an involvement of both parties) were higher at farmers' markets than supermarkets. Cicatiello et al. (2015), when comparing supermarkets, green grocers, and farmers' markets, found that interactions occurring at farmers' markets were more likely to foster social exchanges among strangers. Carson et al. (2016) examined types of interactions occurring at farmers' markets between consumers and vendors including purely social and interactions that included information exchange. Interactions that were informational in nature were most influential and, depending on their intensity, were more likely to result in transformative learning (Carson et al., 2016).

Very few studies that are focused on the social dimensions of the food environment have been grounded in concepts from social network theory (Alia et al., 2014). This is a gap because social network theory provides a useful framework for understanding the social processes underlying food procurement, allowing researchers to examine patterns of relationships that exist among people in a social space, such as a grocery store or food pantry (Scott, 2017). In these food procurement places, family, friends, and acquaintances (*alters*) can influence the targeted individual's (*ego*) behavior. The intensity of connections, whether weak or strong, between social network members also holds implications for food-related decision making (Fonseca-Becker and Valente, 2006; Wutich and McCarty, 2008). Stronger ties between egos and alters are characterized by intimate, frequent contact, and include reciprocal obligations (Lin, 2001). Ties with people such as friends, partners, and other family members have been found to guide food-related decisions such as infant feeding practices (Wutich and McCarty, 2008) and adult and adolescent eating behaviors (Fletcher et al., 2011; Pachucki et al., 2011). Weaker ties are those found between individuals who are loosely connected and often hold memberships to different social groups such as between a store cashier and a customer. An individual's chances of gaining new information or accessing different resources are enhanced if the ego reaches out to alters with whom weaker ties exist (Granovetter, 1973). Trustworthiness or personal trust between egos and alters is also a relevant social network concept. Trust is seen as mediating the influence of social relations (Buskens, 2002; Cook, 2005). For example, trusting relationships built up through repeated personal contact were prioritized by farmers' market consumers above produce quality factors such as organic certification (Moore, 2006).

Building on social network theory and emerging research illuminating the role of social networks in diet-related decision-making, the goal of this mixed methods research was to explore social interactions within different types of food procurement places and to examine how these interactions influence perceptions of these places. Specific research questions include: 1) What are the main food procurement places, 2) To what extent do participants have social connections within food procurement places, 3) What is the nature of social connections at these places, 4) What are participant's perceptions of social interactions at their main food procurement places?

2. Methods

2.1. Study context

Data collection occurred between November 2015 and March 2016 in Cleveland and East Cleveland, Ohio, adjacent municipalities with roughly 400,000 residents and a high proportion of low-income census tracts. The majority of residents in Cleveland (53.3%) and East Cleveland (93.2%) were African American and more than one third of the households receive SNAP (US Census Bureau, 2015). The majority of census tracts in these cities have low access to full-service supermarkets (U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2016) and higher access to farmers' markets (3.3 markets per 100,000 residents) compared with state and national trends (2.3 and 2.5 per 100,000 residents, respectively) (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2013).

The present research is part of an ongoing mixed methods dissemination and implementation study called FreshLink that aims to improve the reach, adoption, and impact of farmers' markets among recipients of SNAP using a peer-to-peer outreach approach. Two formative studies were conducted to guide the development of the intervention including a cross-sectional survey with findings previously published (Flocke et al., 2017; Freedman et al., 2017) and in-depth social network mapping interviews that are the focus of the present analysis. Interviews were conducted to explore constraints and facilitators influencing food habits to identify factors that may support integration of a farmers' market within overall food shopping routines.

2.2. Sampling and recruitment

We recruited 30 parents/caregivers into the present study from a sample of 224 who participated in a prior survey and consented to be followed-up for future project-related studies. The goal was to reach theoretical saturation of emerging themes and have a sample size including at least 10% of the survey sample. Eligibility criteria included that participants: were 18 years of age or older, had children 18 years of age or younger in their home, had received SNAP during the past 12 months, were responsible for at least some household food procurement, and spoke English or Spanish. Per the sampling frame of the survey study, all participants lived within a mile of a farmer's market and within census tracts where at least 30% of the population received SNAP.

We relied on information from the survey to purposively select participants based on several theoretically meaningful indicators to inform our peer-to-peer outreach approach. Theoretically relevant factors included: social network size, working or student status, and experiences with farmers' market shopping. For social network size, we reviewed responses to the following survey question: Among the people close to you in Cleveland, how many are currently receiving EBT/Ohio directions? We identified three categories of network size: 18+, 5–17, and less than 4. We also selected people based on their work or student status because those working or studying outside of the home may have more opportunities to interact with more people. Given that the end goal of our formative research was to develop a farmers' market specific outreach model, another theoretically relevant dimension for our sampling approach was farmers' market shopping experiences. Based

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