



Animating community supported agriculture in North East England: Striving for a 'caring practice'

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ABSTRACT

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This paper draws on a case study of a new Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) scheme in the north of England to draw attention to some of the ethical issues encountered when using a participatory action research approach to animating CSA. Both CSA and participatory action research have been associated with the concept of 'caring practice' and an 'ethic of care'. CSAs can be conceptualised as attempts to engage with ethical issues in the food system. Action research is also a value laden approach. The case study illustrates how the complexities of conducting this type of research leads to many instances of having to make ethical choices and claims that these decisions are helpfully framed by Warren's (1999) claim that these choices should aim to result in 'care practices'. Similar dilemmas and choices will arise in other contexts and require situated negotiation and decision making. Focussing on caring practice may help to construct a rationale for consistent choices.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Purpose

This paper draws on a case study of a new Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) scheme to draw attention to some of the ethical issues encountered when using a participatory action research approach to animating CSA. The paper begins by providing context and background and a brief introduction to CSA and action research. A narrative account of the case study precedes a discussion of some key themes pertaining to ethical considerations. Food production and consumption are inherently bound up with ethical choices. That our choices about how we produce and/or consume food are intimately connected to all other aspects of our human existence is well recognised: Pence asserts that "How we make those choices says much about our values, our relationship to those who produced our food and the kind of world we want" (cited in Buller, 2010, p. 1875). Lang (1999, p. 218) makes a similar point: "food is both a symptom and a symbol of how we organise ourselves and our societies. It is both a vignette and a microcosm of wider social realities". CSAs (and other models that comprise the family of so called 'alternative food networks') can be conceptualised as attempts to engage with ethical issues in the food system, albeit incompletely and imperfectly. Action research is also

a value laden approach (Brydon-Miller, 2008) that requires continual attention to the choices that have to be made in its conduct (Reason, 2006). Participatory research has its critics (e.g. Hayward et al., 2004; Cooke and Kothari, 2001) and demands a careful and reflexive attitude if it is not to be manipulative rather than emancipatory. It is unsurprising, therefore, that ethical dilemmas form a central topic of concern for this study.

1.2. Prior research and context

The research builds on a feasibility study (Charles, 2005) in which the factors that contribute to the success of existing CSAs were investigated and an attempt was made to assess if the critical resources and conditions were sufficiently present in the area to merit a fully fledged action research programme. The study concluded that the balance of assets and barriers was marginally in favour of pursuing further action. This work provided the first entry point into the project and hence influenced the choice of research site.

The research took place from 2007 to 2009 in Weardale, Co Durham, which is situated in the north east region of England. The north east has persistently high levels of deprivation and compares poorly with other English regions in terms of GDP, economic participation, educational attainment, and household income levels (One North East, 2006; Worthy and Gouldson, 2010). Much of this can be explained by the rapid decline of heavy industry (especially coal mining) in the 20th century. The region also has many assets and strengths of which one of the strongest is the natural and

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cultural heritage; there are two World Heritage Sites, a National Park, and an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty.

Agriculture in the region is largely red meat production; arable is dominated by cereal production with only a small number of specialist growers in the vegetable, salad and fruit market. It is estimated that the local food and drink sector in the North East accounts for a smaller than average percentage of total food and drink sales (4% against a national average of 6%) (ADAS, 2006).

Until 2009, when Co Durham became a single unitary local authority area,¹ Weardale lay within the boundary of Wear Valley District Council, which was ranked 33rd out of 354 local authority areas in England in the 2007 Indices of Multiple Deprivation² (where number one indicates the most deprived area). There is no commercial vegetable or fruit production in Weardale apart from a small acreage of potatoes. However, vegetables and fruit are successfully grown in allotments and gardens and, more recently, at a local primary school.

2. Community supported agriculture (CSA)

2.1. CSA: a brief history

CSA is frequently placed in the literature as a member of a wider family of so called 'alternative food networks' (AFNs), which are associated with the (contested) concepts of 'local', 'embeddedness', 'quality', and 'short food supply chains'. The 'alternative' in AFNs generally refers to practices that "differ from those typical in industrial food systems" (Cox et al., 2008 p. 204; see also Renting and Marsden, 2003).

There is no single definition of CSA. In the UK, the Soil Association (a well established charity sponsoring organic agriculture) currently promotes and supports CSA through Making Local Food Work, a five-year lottery funded partnership to support the growth of the local food sector. It adopted a very broad definition of CSA:

"A partnership between farmers and consumers where the responsibilities and rewards of farming are shared." (Soil Association, 2001)

CSAs are themselves very diverse and include a wide range of food production enterprises of varying scale and ways of working. The key feature that distinguishes them from other models where there is some form of direct relationship between producers and consumers lies in the nature of that relationship. Consumers 'join' a CSA and become 'members'; they enter into some form of partnership arrangement with the people who produce their food and offer a commitment to purchase a 'share of the harvest'. This enhanced relationship can take many forms but at its most basic level embeds an ethical dimension into the transaction. CSA is a 'grassroots' movement arising directly from producer and consumer partnerships. An international network, initiated by a group in France, was set up in 2004. URGENCI (www.urgenci.net) describes the model as "Local Solidarity Partnerships between Producers and Consumers (LSPPC)". This umbrella definition covers many such partnerships across the world including CSA (US, UK, Australia), AMAP (France), ASC (Canada), Teikei (Japan), and Reciproco (Portugal).

Compared to some forms of direct marketing of agricultural and horticultural produce such as Farmers' Markets and Box Schemes,

CSA has been slow to develop in the UK. Here CSAs range from small community based initiatives to larger farms or parts of farm businesses. The longest surviving CSA in the UK is Earthshare (www.earthshare.co.uk) in Morayshire, which started in 1994. The latest estimate of numbers from the Soil Association (2011) is of 50 trading CSAs. The geographical spread is very uneven, with a concentration in the South West region, followed by Yorkshire and Humber, and the South East. This distribution is similar to that found for AFNs in general in the UK (see Ricketts Hein et al., 2006).

2.2. CSA: aspirations meet reality

From their beginnings in Japan and Europe in the 1970s, CSAs were underpinned by values and principles covering areas that can be described as pertaining to social, economic and environmental justice such as community relationships, co-operation, sustainable production, reconnection between the land and people, associative economy, and shared responsibility (e.g. see Groh and McFadden, 1997; Henderson and Van En, 1999; Cone and Myhre, 2000). For many of those involved in initiating CSAs it was perceived as a way to take a step back from the globalised food economy, to de-commodify food production and to value aspects of food such as taste, local variety, freshness, provenance, method of production, and to forge a conscious connection between the land and the food on your plate (Groh and McFadden, 1997; Henderson and Van En, 1999; DeLind, 1999; Thompson and Coskuner-Balli, 2007; Feagan and Henderson, 2009). CSA has been analysed as a form of 'caring practice' (Wells and Gradwell, 2001) that Warren (1999) describes as practices that "maintain, promote, or enhance the well-being of relevant parties, or do not cause unnecessary harm to the well-being of those parties" (pp. 139–140). 'Parties' can be human or non-human and so the ethic of care when applied to CSA encompasses human relationships (social and economic), animal welfare, and ecosystem management. This analysis has been further explored in relation to CSA and other 'alternative' food networks by Kneafsey et al. (2008). Coming from a different angle, Thompson and Coskuner-Balli (2007) propose CSA as a form of ethical consumerism that provokes "feelings of enchantment" for both producers and consumers by providing opportunities to escape from convenience orientated, technologically mediated food practices. Amongst the diversity of enterprises that call themselves CSAs (or equivalent) are those that place more or less emphasis on these values but all include them to some degree: as Hinrichs (2000, p. 301) suggests, a system in which the CSA members commit to purchase a product before they know precisely what they will receive inevitably "requires some measure of trust".

Forty or more years on, some commitment to these values remains. For example, Kneafsey et al. (2008) observed that for Earthshare, motivation for both consumers and producers is about "the opportunity to be involved in a mode of food production-consumption which accords with a particular set of ethical concerns for how economies and communities should function" (p. 84). However, it is now recognised that the idealism with which the early adopters set out is in practice extremely hard, if not impossible, to maintain whilst still having to operate within the wider context of a globalised and industrialised food system. In such an environment it has been necessary to temper ideals with realism and to pragmatically adapt to ways of working that acknowledge the reality that many members of CSAs may take what Feagan and Henderson (2009) describe as instrumental and functional approaches, rather than a fully collaborative orientation. Similar issues are apparent in DeLind's (1999) account of her involvement in setting up a community initiated CSA in Michigan. The desire to act on a different orientation that embraces social and environmental goals can prove problematic to work out in practice. Inadequate

¹ Local government administrative areas in England are either one tier (e.g. Unitary Councils) or two tier (County and District Councils). In some areas, Unitary Authorities replaced two tier Councils in the most recent reorganisation.

² <http://www.communities.gov.uk/communities/neighbourhoodrenewal/deprivation/deprivation07/>.

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