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Community food systems and anti-racist practice

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PROJECT SUMMARY

Across the nation a movement is building around sustainable agricultural practices and nutritional food for all. This movement seeks, through programmatic and policy changes, to comprehensively address food production, processing and consumption at the local scale. Organizations work on issues of access to food, food assistance, poor nutrition and obesity, which are mediated by one's race, class and gender that, in turn, often affect educational, employment and social opportunities. To address the food system in a comprehensive manner would suggest the need to understand and confront the process of racism. Significant potential exists for understanding, dialogue and active work to combat racism via food system programs.

The research determines whether the programs undertaken by CFSC member organizations serve as a means to actively confront racism, the feminization of poverty and class inequalities that constitute the food system. It considers the ways in which organizations engage in anti-racist practice and seeks to understand why they may not address racism. The research addresses the larger question of how groups form alliances across difference. The practice of working through difference to promote positive social change is important to the strength of community and the state of democracy. The study asks:

1. How do community food system organizations negotiate difference?
2. Does the work of food system organizations serve to reinforce privilege, empower people or both?
3. Which types of organizations engage in some form of anti-racist practice and how do they do it?

The research employs qualitative and quantitative methods. The study sends a survey to a broad cross section of Community Food Security Coalition member organizations nation-wide and conducts in-depth, semi-structured interviews with member organizations in the North East region. The interview data is analyzed by qualitative data analysis software. Materials produced by the organizations are examined using textual analysis. Discriminant and factor analysis are used to understand the survey data and descriptive statistics employed to present it. Once some results have been identified, focus groups are conducted for the insights that arise through group discussion.

Intellectual merit: The study responds to calls in Geography to a) examine how white privilege is reproduced and how it is being addressed (Pulido, 2000; Pulido, 2002); b) conduct research on racism outside the typical places—the “inner city”, ‘the reservation’ and the ‘border’—and to examine anti-racist practice beyond where it is usually found (Delaney, 2002, 6); c) address a gap in the literature on *how* coalitions come together through difference (Kurtz, 2003) and d) to conduct action-oriented research that is relevant to society (Pain, 2003). Further, by addressing how community food systems organizations negotiate difference, the study responds to a need identified in the community food systems literature to develop a theoretical framework with which to conceptualize food systems (Anderson and Cook 1999). The study proposes that the conceptual framework of community food systems must incorporate an understanding of power, privilege and difference. Further, it suggests that organizations should address how race, class, gender and other differences shape ‘community’, ‘the local’ and the food system. Finally, the research responds to concerns voiced recently from within the community food systems movement that suggest a need to address issues of difference and to engage in anti-racist practice.

Broader impacts: The study has merit in two categories of the broader impact criteria of the NSF:

- 1) **Broad dissemination to enhance scientific and technological understanding:** The intent of the research is to provide data and prepare materials that can be shared with the Community Food Security Coalition (CFSC) and Sustainable Agriculture Working Group coalitions among others. The work will be presented not only to academic and community food security conferences but also to food system groups interested in engaging in anti-racist practice. It will be published in diverse media including the web, where the materials will be made available, the CFSC newsletter if possible, and popular journals in addition to academic journals that emphasize teaching and research.
- 2) **Benefits to society:** The research is beneficial to the social goal of creating a more just society. Organizations that engage in anti-racist food system work can be emulated to promote community food systems that respect the diversity of experiences and interests and acknowledge the way that power embedded in social relations shapes access to healthy food. The research will help community food systems organizations take stock of how they negotiate difference and respond to race, class and gender inequalities. The research explicitly includes an examination of successful strategies, which will be analyzed and presented in a way that is readily understandable, toward the goal of providing specific examples and explanations regarding the application of the research findings.