

Factors associated with support for local food systems: The significance of class position

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Project Information

Summary:

This report describes the results of focus groups conducted to better understand consumer support for local and organic foods. Focus groups provide an in-depth understanding of interest and concerns that are not achievable through more quantitative data collection methods. The information gained can serve as a catalyst for expanding existing or new sustainable agriculture projects, as well as help to inductively develop a model of factors associated with these foods.

A better understanding of the following guided the study:

1. Support for local agriculture;
2. Consumption of local and organic agricultural products; and
3. Perceived needs for developing sustainable food systems.

Introduction:

In Ohio and across the region, there is significant interest in alternative food systems. Alternative food systems are believed to have many beneficial outcomes such as building community amongst producers and consumers and improving the economic viability of farmers and farming regions. Despite this increased interest, few studies have explored consumer awareness and support of these systems and especially, differences in support across consumer groups. This project is timely due to a variety of new and practical initiatives aimed at developing local food systems. The results of this study can contribute to the success of these initiatives and shed light on new areas of importance.

Project Objectives:

The research project has several outcomes. The first is to engage a diversity of consumers in the discussion of sustainable agriculture. Most studies aim to assess attitudes of consumers already engaged in the consumption of these foods. This study compares those not particularly involved with those that are engaged in the consumption of local and organic foods. The focus groups will contribute to a better understanding of motivations or factors related to support for local and organic agriculture and consumption of these foods. The focus groups will also assist in better understanding the perceived needs for developing local food systems and will assist farmers interested in marketing their products in new and innovative ways and help them to identify opportunities to expand their markets into areas (or consumer segments) where there might be significant barriers.

Cooperators

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Research

Materials and methods:

To better understand support for local and organic foods among consumers a semi-structured discussion guide was developed of core questions to be asked to each group. The guide was reviewed by a panel and modified based on their feedback. Human subject approval was achieved prior to focus group participant recruitment and sessions were convened. A moderator and assistant facilitated each session and followed the semi-structured question guide. Each session was audio-recorded and tapes were transcribed. Analysis of each transcript was conducted using a transcript-based method. This method entails reading the transcript, making notes, coding sections and developing categories based on themes.

Members of four established groups of consumers convened by Ohio State University Extension Franklin County were sent an invitation letter asking for their participation. The other two focus groups were comprised of members of a Central Ohio food cooperative or voluntary simplicity organization. To recruit these participants, a flyer was developed and displayed at the food cooperative and disseminated via electronic mail to voluntary simplicity members. These participants are referred to throughout this report as “motivated consumers.”

At each focus group discussion, participants signed a participation consent form and filled out a background survey. Following conventional practice on the use of incentives for focus group participation, each participant was given a gift card. A total number of 40 Central Ohioans participated and groups ranged from 3 to 6

participants per session. Table 1 characterizes the participants.

[Please contact the NCR-SARE office at ncrsare@umn.edu to view the tables associated with this report.]

Research results and discussion:

Food Shopping

Focus group participants were asked to identify where they shop and the types of foods they typically shop for. Most participants reported they shopped at one or more of the larger supermarket chains in the area; however a number of participants shopped at a variety of different stores. The Latino focus group participants identified shopping at both large supermarket chains and smaller specialty markets. Motivated consumer participants reported shopping in supermarkets, but also in smaller format stores such as health food stores and a food cooperative. They also mentioned frequently shopping at farmer's markets during the summer months. One motivated consumer participant stated with regard to smaller stores, "I also simply like the fact that the places are not monstrously huge and you don't have an excessive number of choices. I like having a limited selection. Otherwise you get overwhelmed. Plus, in normal commercial chain grocery stores, I often find myself looking at labels going, "okay, where's the real food?"

The types of foods participants identified as purchasing on a typical shopping trip included items such as milk, eggs, bread, fruits, vegetables and meat. A number of focus group participants classified as more "motivated" to support local and organic foods identified other items such as nuts, supplements and bulk grains.

Food Qualities Deemed Important as Purchasing Considerations

A number of similar food qualities were identified by focus group participants as important. Price, freshness, flavor or taste, and healthfulness, such as reduced sodium or fat content were important considerations mentioned often.

With regard to price, one participant mentioned doing without certain foods if they were not on sale, while another said she tries to shop on days meat is marked down and takes it home and freezes it. For some price also impacts the purchasing of fresh vegetables. One participant noted, "And like the fresh vegetables. Them is expensive. I be tryin' to go buy salads and like cucumbers and stuff like that cause my son he like a lot of healthy stuff too. But, it be too expensive. Tomatoes is like \$4.99 for a four pack." Another stated, "Because, you know, most people feel healthy stuff is, is, really expensive, but if there was some non-expensive healthy food then probably a lot more people would get healthy food if it wasn't so expensive." Some focus group participants noted how saving on food allowed them to purchase other things or helped their money to go further.

Despite most agreeing on the importance of these, motivated consumers also identified the importance of food being minimally processed, having less packaging and the ability to purchase in bulk. One participant noted, "What I find, the more you are willing to cook from scratch, you can afford the higher quality ingredients because you aren't paying for all that processing." Another focus group participant said, "Well, I don't use mixes and things like that. Except for cake mixes, if I am giving it away, but if I make for my family, I make it from scratch. I have never tried that Hamburger Helper or anything like that. I cook from scratch - I think it is healthier."

Bulk purchasing was also mentioned by other focus group participants, but in the context of sale items and stocking up, particularly for meats. For example, one

participant noted, "If you go at about 9 or 10 in the morning they have the meat marked down from the day before and I try to hit that. Economy, you know." Another stated, "And, most of the time when I go buy food I'll like try to buy, uh, like I said, whatever's on sale. I'll try to stock up on that in one week and then I'll throw it in the freezer or put it in individual bags and freeze it." Another participant agreed, "I'll try to get there round the time they mark it down - like the day before it goes before it expires and I'll take it home and I'll throw it in the freezer and I'll freeze it."

Seasonality was mentioned by a number of focus group participants as an important issue when making food purchasing decisions. Two views of seasonality emerged. One set of participants adjust their purchasing and diet according to what is in season. One participant said, "I try to eat seasonally. So, I don't eat a lot of fruit in the winter time." Another said, "I'm buying things more or less in season - like I would consider citrus in season right now because at least it comes from Florida." Another noted, "I buy a lot of fruits that's in season and vegetables that's in season." The other set of participants purchase foods out of season; although acknowledge that many fruits and vegetables are not in season or are picked too early and have dealt with foods being not ripe enough or too ripe.

Among older focus group participants, smaller portion sizes were identified as being important to reduce waste. "That is a big, big problem with me that portions are so much that you are bound to through out a lot of it. And, I am big on freezing, but there are a lot of things that you can't freeze." Following up on this conversation another stated, "We are pretty much the generation that we were raised during the depression and waste was sinful."

Support for Local and Organic Foods

Focus group participants were asked to share their experiences with purchasing local and organic foods, including their interest in purchasing more of these foods and some of the reasons why it might be important to support local and organic production.

Focus group participants comprised of members of the food cooperative and the voluntary simplicity organization expressed greater awareness and interest in local and organic foods than participants in other groups. Most participants were aware of some type of direct marketing of locally grown foods to consumers.

Focus group participants articulated a number of benefits associated with purchasing local foods. For example, most perceived local foods to be fresher. A number of focus group participants noted that going to farmer's markets was fun and an experience. Others noted the importance of supporting local farmers. For example, "It would help the farmers around here I think - our own farmers." Others mentioned eating locally grown foods for food safety reasons and cited food poisoning associated with the consumption of fruits and vegetables not grown in the United States.

A number of motivated participants expressed a preference for local over organic. One motivated focus group participant expressed, "My philosophy is starting to get more local than organic because I don't always know where my food is coming from, even if it's organic." Another stated, "I can't always articulate organic versus the local. It's not that organic isn't important to me. It's that organic doesn't mean the same thing all the time. There are minimum standards that mean organic, but you can do better than that and many farmers do. And that's what's important to me. It's that you're not doing the bare minimum to be organic. I'd rather you not be certified organic and have a better quality product for me to eat, for me to enjoy, but also that's going to sustain your land and sustain your community." Local was also preferred by others over organic. "I would still go for local over organic."

The expense of organic was mentioned by a number of focus group participants even those more motivated to consume them. One motivated participant said, "I try to get organic as much as possible, but it's expensive." A participant from another group said, "The organic foods need to be cheaper than the food they put stuff in." and another agreed, "Right, it is high. Organic food is high." An older participant noted, "Organic, if organic wasn't so expensive that's what I would buy. Once in a while I will get it anyway, but I don't usually." Similarly, another older respondent said, "I don't buy organic, I can't afford it." Another said, "Oh, it's real pricey and I am not convinced it is much better."

Accessing local foods was noted as a potential barrier. One participant noted when referring to a farmer that sells locally corn and strawberries, "I would go everyday except he's not open before I go to work and by the time I come home it's all gone." Older participants mentioned distance as a barrier to purchasing locally grown foods, particularly those sold off the farm.

Relational Aspects of Food Decisions

Focus group participants not only considered their own preferences, but also the preferences of family members when making food purchasing decisions. For example, one participant said, "I think about my children first of all. I always think about fiber and about providing them with a balanced meal at home." Another stated, "It is always in the back of my mind to keep them (my kids) healthy as possible and teach them and keep myself as healthy as possible."

Access, Availability and Quality of Food Shopping Venues

Focus group participants expressed different experiences with regard to access and quality of food shopping venues. Among some participants, access to a variety of shopping options is not a problem. "I am lucky because I live in an area where I can be a little picky where I am going. In my radius, I have all kinds of stores." For others though, access was identified as a significant barrier. One participant noted, "Yes, we are lucky because we drive, but there are people that have to ask others to drive them to go shopping and that makes their food choices limited. Transportation is definitely an obstacle to acquire certain foods." Another noted, "Transportation is bad. And then gas is so high."

Price was consistently identified as a barrier for making it hard for participants and others like them to purchase healthy foods. Many indicated they would shop at natural or health food stores if the prices were not so high and preferred the quality of the foods over those in traditional grocery stores. One participant noted, "The price as much as anything. I would do all my shopping at Wild Oats, if I could afford to." Others noted the prices of foods in the aisles containing natural or health foods in the grocery stores were high. For example a participant observed, "But oh boy, the prices. Oh really high. You just walk right on by if you are poor like I am."

Store quality also emerged during some focus group discussions. One participant noted, "Um, like grocery stores that help us save money - those tend to have a lot of traffic. They don't have enough help. So when you are in there it's so time consuming. You have to allow 3 to 4 hours just to shop, go through the lines and get out of the store."

Recommendations for Making Healthy Foods More Accessible

Focus group participants were asked, what are some ways to make sure all Central Ohioans have access to healthy affordable foods? Recommendations fell into three categories - those that identified traditional food aid programs, those that identified it was up to the individual to gain more knowledge and commitment, and those that identified community based efforts such as farmer's markets as one solution (as long as the prices were reasonable). Those recommending strategies aligning with

traditional food aid programs identified as a need delivery of healthy foods- similar to the Meals on Wheels program to those least able to access them. Others observed food pantries were a good way of making healthy foods accessible. However, some noted the hours were inconvenient and that they needed to be made more convenient for working people too. A participant noted, "We talking about hours to be more like accessible or open three hours in the morning and three hours in the evening. That way the people that work during the day can still go at night."

A number of other participants identified gardening or community gardening as a way of increasing access to healthy foods. Still, one participant noted, there can be problems with community gardens if they are not well maintained or harvested on-time. Others noted there was not enough time to garden, but it would be a way to ensure access to healthy foods.

Another participant identified ways their group could be involved in promoting healthy alternatives. She suggested a newsletter and elaborated, "Like, a committee get together and talk about healthy foods and stuff like that. Run it past like a doctor or something, make sure it's healthy and then put it out like recipes in a newsletter." Another agreed, "Yeah, cause most people don't really think about healthy foods cause they don't really - it's not an everyday thing."

Participation Summary

Educational & Outreach Activities

PARTICIPATION SUMMARY:

Education/outreach description:

A paper presentation based on this research was presented at the 2006 Rural Sociological Society Annual Meeting in Kentucky. The information gained from this research has been presented at the 2007 Organic Trade Association's All Things Organic Conference in Chicago, IL. A topical report based on this research is in development for publication on the Social Responsibility Initiative website at The Ohio State University. The findings will also be included as part of a scholarly manuscript in development for submission. The results will also be shared at the 2008 Rural Sociological Society Meeting in New Hampshire.

Publications

Bean Smith, M. 2008. Consumer Support for Organic and Local Foods in Ohio. Ph.D. Dissertation, Rural Sociology Program, The Ohio State University.

Bean Smith, M., J.S. Sharp, M. Miller. A Comparison of Attitudes about Local and Organic Foods, Health and Farming: Social Responsibility Initiative Topical Report #1. Columbus, OH: Social Responsibility Initiative.

Presentations

Bean Smith, M. 2007. Profiling Supporters of Local Foods. Invited presentation for The Organic Trade Association's All Things Organic Conference, Chicago, IL. May.

Bean Smith, M. 2006. Support for Local and Organic Foods. Invited presentation for The Christopher Program, The Ohio State University, Columbus, OH. April.

Bean Smith, M. 2006. Ohio Organic and Local Food Consumers. Invited presentation for the 2006 Ohio Fruit and Vegetable Congress, Columbus, OH.

January.

Bean Smith, M. 2005. Support for Local Foods in Ohio. Panel presentation for the Central Ohio Chapter of the Sierra Club, Columbus, OH. November.

Project Outcomes

Project outcomes:

The findings associated with this research are significant in several ways. The findings of this research corroborate existing quantitative data from a survey of Ohioans and a survey of "motivated consumers" conducted by the project coordinator. The use of multiple methods to explore consumer behavior allows for greater confidence in understanding preferences. The findings also allowed for inductively identifying factors of importance not specifically identified a priori by the researcher as important.

One of the significant impacts identified with this research was to be able to provide market-based data on consumer attitudes about sustainable food systems. The data collected as part of this study and the associated quantitative study have been utilized by a regional specialty foods chain in the Midwest and by an innovative distributor in NE Ohio as part of their market research.

This research also sought to engage a diversity of consumers in a discussion of the food system to better understand support for local and organic foods and increasing access to these foods.

Farmer Adoption

The information gleaned from the consumer focus groups and associated quantitative survey results should help to assist farmer decision-making and farm and sustainable agriculture organizations interested in agricultural economic development.

Recommendations:

Areas needing additional study

The purpose of this study was to gain a better understanding of food consumption patterns of Central Ohioans and in particular better understand support for local and organic agriculture. Sustainable agricultural development requires market-based research that will assist farmers in marketing their products in new and innovative ways. The results suggest there is generally greater support for local agriculture than organic agriculture among Central Ohioans. There is also greater support for local and organic agriculture among a subset of consumers identified as "motivated" for the purposes of this report. Improving access to local foods seems to be particularly important for groups limited by transportation.

Further corroboration with existing quantitative data collected on support for local and organic foods is underway with preliminary results suggesting there is greater support for local foods among all Ohioans; however, price and convenience remain important factors shaping even these consumption decisions.

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