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**Examining attitudes and understandings of SNAP recipients towards the use of SNAP
benefits at Farmers' Markets in Gettysburg**

Introduction

What are current attitudes and understandings of SNAP recipients towards the use of SNAP benefits at farmers' markets in Gettysburg? The research inquires into why recipients would or would not feel encouraged to use their SNAP benefits at these markets. Also, there is an effort to identify what SNAP recipients identify as the barriers situated between them and healthy, informed food choices. These barriers revealed themselves through the investigation into reoccurring themes. We found that these themes include but are not exclusive to time itself, the perspective vs. reality of farmers' markets, the cultural context of SNAP recipients, social strain and fear of embarrassment, and overall attitudes towards food and eating. The ultimate aim of this project is to bridge the gap between the perspectives of SNAP recipients and the perspectives of those who promote healthful eating and the movement towards local sustainability. How can we come to a comprehensive understanding of the barriers situated between SNAP recipients and the farmers' markets?

Discussion of Background Literature

The third chapter of Real Food, Real Choice titled "The SNAP Recipient Perspective" offers a larger context within which our project is situated. First we must ask ourselves: Who are

these SNAP recipients? “SNAP recipients represent a cross-section of Americans living near or below the poverty line” (Briggs et al 2010). SNAP benefits are akin to food stamps, however the meaning behind SNAP itself lends this effort a realizable direction: “On October 1, 2008, the name of the Food Stamp Program was changed to ‘Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program’ (SNAP)....” And “the new name reflects the program’s mission to not only provide food assistance, but also increase nutrition to improve the health and well-being of low-income people” (Briggs et al 2010). This program is invested in aiding low-income families in a multidimensional sense: SNAP benefits are provided by the government to low-income individuals as a safety net.

Yet the benefits of local community incentives for more fruits and vegetables in convenient stores could be overwhelmed by federal policies that create a favorable business environment for the production of highly processed foods – meaning that individual choices are most definitely influenced by a larger system and structural forces such as the government. However, low socioeconomic status has constantly been associated with increased rates of obesity and overweight in North American population. While this paradox is prevalent, obesity rates in women have also been shown to be higher among SNAP recipients (Zagorsky & Smith 2009, Gibson 2003). Either due to increased intake of calories due to security of food, or due to intake of unhealthier high-calorie, low-cost foods that are affordable for SNAP recipients, these differences in BMI in mostly women are significant (Gibson 2003). Thus, the current food systems in the US have a broader impact on the public health, health disparities and eventually, on the cycle of poverty that is extremely difficult to break through. The response to these conditions then has been a movement towards local and sustainable living in general.

The farmers' markets are such possible places where foods of both nutritional and local value can be found. Naturally then there has been a push for inspiring SNAP recipients to contribute in the movement of localizing real food. But generally SNAP recipients view farmers' markets in a negative light, due to "higher prices, inconvenient hours, complex shopping experience, and limited discount opportunities" (Briggs et al 2010). There is a disconnect between SNAP recipients and farmers' markets, which national research suggests arises primarily out of skewed perceptions of the SNAP recipients towards the markets. First of all "affordability [is] the main factor deterring SNAP recipients from visiting farmers markets" (Briggs et al 2010), and yet "some studies may highlight that price differences are actually varied or even lower at farmers' markets for many products" (Briggs et al 2010). On top of this disagreement between perception and reality are the results that we yielded in our own project, which suggest a deeper and more ubiquitous barrier in the works. According to Neff et al (2009), "a food systems approach begins with the recognition that the roots of health disparities include but go deeper than individual choice, nutrition, or price. They reach outwards to community factors like access and deeper to broad social, economic, and political factors that impact food production and processing." The scope of this topic is much larger than the range of our project, but this larger context ought to be kept in mind.

Another article focuses on the effort to not only increase access to healthy food options but to also eliminate junk food options. The argument goes as follows: "if tobacco and alcohol can be excluded [from the list of purchasable items through the EBT card] because of their risks to health, why not junk food" (Shenkin et al 2010)? This movement ties into the movement towards a sustainable local food system, which is why SNAP recipients are being encouraged to purchase local items. Physical health and social harmony are inextricably wrapped up in one

another. Yet while it would ostensibly make sense to purchase local goods, other barriers keep consumers from always making the best choices. As one participant in another study commented: "if you buy local you are putting it back into your community" (Webber et al 2008), but the drawbacks can be steep: the schedule of the markets does not usually complement the busy lives of consumers, there is ambiguity surrounding the affordability of local produce, and the variety of goods is limited when compared to a supermarket (Webber et al 2008). Health is one among many other competing "Goods". Dramatic growth in farmers markets, for example, can improve access to healthy foods, even though most proponents of these markets focus on the community-building and economic benefits rather than the public health benefits (Muller 2009 p231). People, especially SNAP recipients, are keen on spending their money well and finding convenient venues that offer an array of household goods, which are needs that usually compete with notions of health and well-being, and those factors are contributing to the barriers between farmers' markets and low-income families.

Possible barriers that prevent SNAP recipients from considering the farmers' market as their priority shopping choice are suggested in some of the articles. First, fruits and vegetables are commonly perceived to be more expensive food choices, although they actually contain more nutrients for the same cost when compared to less healthful foods. This is one reason why the farmers' market, a market that provides mostly fresh fruits and vegetables, may appeal to SNAP recipients less. At the same time, higher-fat and higher-calorie foods are perceived as lower cost foods and thus appeal to the recipients more. Moreover, together with the perceived cost factor, lack of time and convenience may also cause SNAP recipients to purchase a greater amount of foods on sale, larger package sizes to get volume discounts, and less expensive versions of food within product classes. Because of their food choices, low-income populations experience higher

rates of obesity, diabetes, and food insecurity (Peterson, Dodd, Kim and Long Roth 2010, Markowitz 2010).

Second, the lack of education of what healthy eating is and why people should do so appears to be another barrier. Farmers Market Nutrition Program (FMNP) is introduced in one article. It is a federal-state partnership designed to provide fresh, locally grown produce to low-income participants at nutritional risk and expand consumer awareness and use of local produce sold at farmers' markets. Statistics show that participants reported visiting farmers markets more often after the education of FMNP (Dollahite, Nelson, Frongillo and Griffin, 2005). Guthman, Morris and Allen (2006) also suggest that the lack of education is one reason why people support farmers market less.

Third, the introduction of electronic benefit transfer (EBT) machines also put a barrier in front of SNAP recipients. The transition from paper food stamps to EBT machines has made many farmers markets difficult to accept SNAP because EBT systems require both phone lines and electricity, neither of which is available if farmers' markets are outdoor (Guthman, Morris and Allen 2006).

Aside from the barriers, a few points brought up by Gerbasi (2006) show the benefits of farmers' markets. First, it enhances the relationship between local farmers and customers. As costumers are buying products directly from local farmers, trust and loyalty are established. Costumers are also able to get fresh, healthy products, as well as specialty food items. Second, the movement towards local sustainable living also benefits. Third, the farmers' markets strengthen the local economy because farmers' increasing income is associated with an increase in spending at nearby businesses. At the same time, farmers' markets capture a large proportion of tourist dollars because they are attracted to the cultural and social nature of the market. It is no

easy task then determining how the farmers' markets actually fit into the movement towards both local sustainable living and granting access to real food for all community members.

Methods Used

Having had little knowledge about the agriculture and food system in the US, yet enough knowledge about the public health consequences of these systems, we were curious to learn more about how socioeconomic structures shape the way food is consumed here in Gettysburg. With this piqued interest, we all decided to choose a topic related to the Farmers Markets in Gettysburg and to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) recipients for the project. Initially, we spoke to two actively involved members of the Adams County Food Policy Council (FPC). After getting some background information from them, our next step was to do an online database search for relevant peer-reviewed literature. After the preliminary research, we contacted individuals from the different offices in order to get in touch with the recipients, because we were not familiar with them personally. Therefore, our selection of participants was based on their availability and willingness to participate according to the individuals we contacted.

Seven out of the ten interviews were tape-recorded and we took notes for the rest of them. Note-taking proved difficult at times. We had to focus on the key material to jot down, and needed to write out thoughts in a meaningful manner in order to maintain legibility of the text in general. We entered the interviews with a slew of questions already organized, but allowed for the interviewee to entertain other thoughts and inquiries. More often than not though, we followed through the sequence of our questions. While recording, we were concerned about

making the interviewees uneasy. However, all the participants were comfortable with that format. Transcribing the recorded interviews, on the other hand, was arduous.

After an initial direct transcription of the interviews, we looked for common important themes among the interviewed recipients as well as other participants such as the director of the Adams County Farmers' Market Association (FMA), a locally renowned dietician, and members of the FPC. Under this meaning-centered approach, we worked through the perspectives and attitudes of SNAP recipients towards the farmers markets and healthy eating habits. Through their accounts, we came to understand the sociopolitical structures within which the perspectives and attitudes of SNAP recipients emerge, which is a critical medical anthropological approach.

While initiating this project, one of our goals was to visit one of the farmers markets for participant observation. However, because the farmers markets only operate beginning May, we were unable to do this. One of our members was able to visit the Gettysburg Downtown Farmers' Market, which is not part of the FMA and does not accept SNAP benefits at all.

Description of Study Site / Context of Participants

We aimed to investigate the perspectives of SNAP recipients towards the farmers markets in Adams County. Originally, we limited our site to Gettysburg but as the research progressed, we expanded it to the Adams County. Among the SNAP recipients, two were introduced through the Wednesday night Circles meeting through FPC member Joanne. Both of the interviews were held in the College Union Building in a location distant from all of the campus commotion. Five of the SNAP recipients being interviewed were introduced by the SCCAP job developer case manager, DL. These interviews were conducted in the SCCAP office. One of the recipients

worked at the SCCAP office, while others were clients there. All of our participants were middle-aged, among whom only one was male. All of them had children.

In addition to looking at the understanding and attitude of the recipients towards the farmers markets, we also looked at the view of other individuals (not on SNAP benefits) who work towards promoting healthier eating in Gettysburg and are involved with either the FPC, the FMA, or the WIC offices. The interviews themselves were done in various locations, including the SCCAP office, Gettysburg College CUB and library, participants home as well as the HAC office. We noticed brochures about the Farmers' markets at the HAC office. In addition, one of the participants, who herself is a vendor/farmer, showed us her own green house and garden.

Findings:

Our main themes from the findings included time, social strain, food and eating attitudes, the SNAP recipient's own cultural context and lack of knowledge or perception versus reality, as the different factors contributing to the attitude and understanding of the farmers' markets.

Time:

Time constraints are the most prevailing barriers preventing SNAP recipients from shopping at the farmers' markets. When Lauren was asked if she perceived there to be any barriers keeping her from going to the farmers' markets, she said "Time itself really. There is just no time." She deems time as a constraint because she works a fulltime job from Monday to Friday and is always "running everyone around". In this case, time itself as a constraint, which is created by busy schedules, which forces some SNAP recipients to do "one-stop-shopping" and eat out or eat pre-prepared foods rather than shop at the farmers' markets. Some other recipients

also see going to the farmers market as a waste of time because they do not know if they are able to get the foods they need in the farmers' market. Julia said that she does not eat lunch at all, and her body has gotten used to this. Instead of breakfast and lunch, she drinks coffee. This is because she does not have time and she does not like pre-packaged foods.

On the other hand, some recipients do not consider time as a barrier because they are not currently employed.

Operating time is another concern that the SNAP recipients expressed. Some recipients seemed to have their preference of when they would like to go shopping. Some recipients usually go shopping in the evenings but that is not necessarily when the Farmers Market is open. Therefore, the SNAP recipients are not sure if they are able to go to the Farmers Market during the hours when it is open. Also, in one instance, a SNAP recipient decided to visit the market to find it closed due to weather or some other unknown reason. The inconvenience and unreliability of the operating hours of the markets turn off customers whose time is of the essence.

Social Strain

Social strain has also been highlighted in our interviews. Rose said "other people don't usually understand... I would feel stupid because I would not know what to do". She also mentioned that her children are occasionally embarrassed by being dependent on SNAP benefits. But she reminds them that their situation is not going to be long term. Julia also pointed out, "someone mentioned at our meeting on Wednesday that some might not take your SNAP cards. So there you are embarrassed, number one! Cuz you go there thinking you can get strawberries, this that, but certain people don't accept the SNAP cards...they want cash or credit cards,

whatever. Don't quite understand SNAP cards, even though they know it's money too." For them, it can be embarrassing to be in line with food and then not be able to purchase it once they reach the cashier. There is this fear of embarrassment and apprehension to draw attention to one's sociopolitical standings.

Attitudes towards Food and Eating

Overall, all recipients have a general idea of what healthy food is. All recipients do attempt to follow a healthy eating habit as much as possible. For instance, Julia realizes that not having anything the whole day and consuming greasy foods is unhealthy. Moreover, they also manage to provide their children with healthy food and attempt to help them develop a healthy eating habit. One recipient said, "I tried eating healthy, especially for my children". Another recipient expressed similar idea. She said, "I tried, like for my daughter, I sat her down at the table, have her eat two vegetables and meat."

Although the SNAP recipients generally understand what healthy eating could be, their definition of healthy eating is not necessarily the same as that of the dietician or the members of the FPC. When asked about healthy eating habits, Francesca, the dietician we interviewed, said, "Eat as 'Whole' as possible...A whole food is a carrot, or a potato: one ingredient." This point of view seems different from that of the recipients who consider simply avoiding fried foods as healthy.

The SNAP recipient's own cultural context

We found differences in the cultural context among the interviewees. While most of the recipients described their eating habit during childhood as unhealthy, one of them talked about following a healthier pattern back then. Lauren recalled food from her childhood being awful.

Similarly, Julia said, “Back when I was younger my mom was a busy woman taking care of two children... we were eating really wrong all the time because my mom did not feel like cooking” On the other hand, Francesca said, “During my childhood we had a big garden, and my mom was big on nutrition. So I grew up with little processed foods in my diet”. Similarly, Nancy also grew up with a garden at her house. Her mom made it a lot of fun to eat healthy food so they never really thought of purchasing canned or processed foods.

Another aspect of the theme on cultural context is that the subject of the farmers’ markets is never in conversation. People just do not talk about it. Lauren mentioned, “I don’t know anyone personally who flaunts that they go—if they even go. It’s just not part of the conversation”.

Lack of Knowledge / Perception vs. Reality

Some recipients were not aware of the farmers’ market at all. Recipients who knew about the farmers’ market still lacked knowledge about the kinds of food available, the prices, locations, the acceptance of EBT cards and operating hours. For example, when asked what she imagined was at the farmers’ markets, Lauren said: “Antiques? I have no idea. Probably fruits, veggies, plants, and flowers”. Julia said, “I would go if they told us what we could use [the EBT card] for... I need to know up front what I can’t get.”

Despite their lack of knowledge, they generally still have a positive attitude towards the farmers’ markets. As Julia said, “I would rather give the money to the farmer for what he’s doing.... they’re growing [food] and are hardworking people too”.

Discussion on Findings:

There is disconnect between SNAP recipients and farmers' markets, which national research suggests arises primarily out of skewed perceptions of the SNAP recipients towards the markets. Affordability of food at the farmers' markets has been shown to be the main barrier for SNAP recipients from visiting farmers markets (Briggs et al 2010). However, according to our findings in the interviews, prices were not a reoccurring major concern. As one of our recipients, Lauren revealed: "It's not the prices—I don't even know the prices." Perhaps the lack of knowledge about prices has contributed to a different result from what was revealed in the literature. According to the director of the FMA though, they are beginning a new program with monetary incentives specifically to entice SNAP recipients to the farmers' markets. This shows how FMA considers price as a major hurdle to overcome.

On the contrary, time constraint seems to be the primary factor deterring SNAP recipients from going to the farmers' markets. Some of the interviewees reported having more than one job and having children to take care of – especially if they were single parents. If they choose to go to farmers' markets, it does not guarantee that they will find everything that they need, and so this situation spurs them into to go to places where they can achieve "one-stop-shopping". The perspective of Nancy is that the farmers' market is a place for social interaction, where parents can bring their children and enjoy shopping, while also learning about cooking and gardening their own food. While this may apply to recipients who are currently unemployed and have free time, it may prove to be a deterring factor for others who consider time as a constraint. Negotiation with farmers was also suggested as an attraction of the farmers' markets. This may be an incentive for lowered price yet also requires spending more time.

Both Nancy and Kate from the FPC mentioned transportation as a possible barrier, but the location of the markets and the availability of Freedom Transit (public transportation) may be the solution for this. There were some recipients, who did consider transportation as a barrier, but there are public transportation options available, and it comes down to a separate matter altogether: most recipients are unsure of where the markets are even located. Therefore, we suggest that lack of information on transportation as well as location may be an underlying factor for this perception.

Our findings suggested that social strain or fear of embarrassment was also prevalent among SNAP recipients, which discouraged them to visit the farmers' markets. Both Kate and Nancy acknowledged this point and mentioned that educating farmers/vendors could be a solution. Nancy also suggested that a lack of bilingual worker at the farmers' markets may be a problem. But since we only interviewed English-speaking individuals, we are unable to conclude if this is the case.

Conclusion

How can we come to a comprehensive understanding of the barriers situated between SNAP recipients and the farmers' markets? How the farmers' market is envisioned by those who promote the local sustainability movement and work to reduce local health disparities tends to differ vastly from the understandings of the SNAP recipients. One SNAP recipient proposed: "Maybe they should sell their stuff outside of the grocery store." Such a statement is revealing of the angle from which SNAP recipients stand. For those not living near or under the poverty line, farmers' markets are focal places meant to bring community members together: it's about the place—the event. But for SNAP recipients, who are concerned with time management and

accessibility of fresh healthy food options, the farmers' markets could be more of a hassle than an attraction: for them it's about the food. Competing visions of a local communal effort are what keep matters unsettled, but that there is a general concern regarding health, access to food and the creation of a local sustainable food system keeps the conversation in a positive light.

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