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IT'S NOT JUST ABOUT FOOD

Empowering Participants Through an Alternative Food Security Program

A Thesis
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In Partial Fulfillment
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Bachelor of Arts

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On my honor
I have neither given nor received
Unauthorized aid on this thesis

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ABSTRACT American conservatism renounces the structural inequalities that lead to widespread poverty and instead proclaims that welfare recipients depend on the state due to poor personal decisions that land them in a state of poverty. Literature on hunger assistance services shows that this prevailing view of poverty and hunger as an individual issue has created a stigma and sense of shame around participating in hunger assistance services. However, current studies on hunger acknowledge that widespread food insecurity is a symptom of larger structural inequalities and explore how to incorporate empowerment theory into hunger assistance services. Limited research exists on the capacity to empower participants through hunger assistance services, especially alternative food security programs, such as community gardens, community kitchens, and food rescue programs. Scholars in this field call for more research that evaluates existing hunger assistance programs through the lens of empowerment theory. I address this gap in the literature through a community-based, qualitative study that explores the capacity of one alternative food security program to empower participants. I suggest here that alternative hunger assistance services have the capacity to empower individuals and communities through a participatory structure, the facilitation of social capital, and the reframing of hunger and poverty as social justice issues rather than individual problems.

INTRODUCTION

The United States of America is the wealthiest country in the world, and yet 12.7% of households are food insecure (USDA Economic Research Service 2016). This condition is defined as lacking stable access to an adequate amount of food to lead an active healthy life for all household members (USDA Economic Research Service 2016). Academic literature on poverty and food insecurity shows that the structural impediments that hinder individuals' ability to pull themselves out of poverty are overshadowed by the dominant narrative that welfare recipients remain dependent on the state by their own free will (Broughton 2004; Cassiman 2006). Rational choice theory supports the narrative that welfare recipients choose to remain in poverty and benefit from state aid. Rational choice theory states that "due to generous welfare benefits, welfare recipients make the rational choice of welfare over work, which leads to (pathological) dependency on the state" (Cassiman 2006). Conservative American politicians and administrations reproduce this dominant narrative or framework by favoring a limited welfare state with reduced benefits to impoverished and food insecure citizens (Stoesz and Karger 1993).

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Scholars researching poverty and food insecurity are concerned with how citizens, politicians, and scholars frame the issue of widespread hunger because this framing affects policies, opinions, and experiences of hunger assistance programs (Benford and Snow 2000; Curtis 1997; Miraftab 1997). These scholars assert that the framing of an issue dictates how it is perceived, both by the people experiencing the issue and those who are not (Benford and Snow 2000). This frame creates a dominant perception of the issue which then determines possible solutions to the problem at hand (Benford and Snow 2000). Welfare reform proponents and traditional hunger assistance programs including food banks, food pantries and government programs, such as SNAP, ignore larger structural inequalities that maintain the existence of widespread poverty and hunger (Curtis 1997; Miraftab 1997; Jacobson 2007; McCullum et al. 2004; Power 1999; Rappaport 1981; Yoon and Hirschl 2015). Instead, they focus on attending to immediate, individual need, thus framing poverty and hunger as individual problems instead of social justice issues (Miraftab 1997; Himmelheber 2014). This frame of poverty and hunger as individual problems generates a stigma and sense of shame around participation in hunger assistance programs (Curtis 1997; Himmelheber 2014).

On the other hand, research shows that alternative food security programs such as community gardens, community kitchens, and food rescue programs have the capacity to empower participants (Miraftab 1997; Himmelheber 2014). Research shows that effective empowerment tactics include placing power and control in the hands of participants, fostering a sense of community through community engagement, facilitating learning and education, and creating a communal space that allows relationships and networks to grow (Himmelheber 2014). There are very few studies that evaluate individual and community empowerment emerging from alternative hunger assistance programs and scholars in this field call for an increase in qualitative

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studies that incorporate empowerment theory. (Himmelheber 2014; Israel et al. 1994; McCullum et al. 2004; Rappaport 1981). Empowerment theory is “the ability of people to gain understanding and control over personal, social, economic, and political forces in order to take action and improve their life situations” (Israel et al. 1994).

To explore the capacity of alternative hunger assistance programs to empower participants, I worked with a local health equity non-profit, Clover Creek Food Rescue to design a qualitative, community-based research project. I completed a case study on an alternative food assistance program, Fit Feast Boutique, that operates out of Lotus Park Community Center and uses rescued food supplied by Food Rescue. I conducted in-depth interviews with Food Rescue employees, Community Center employees, and Lotus Park Community members who regularly attend Fit Feast Boutique.

Based on the academic literature and the data gathered in my interviews, I affirm that alternative food assistance programs, such as Fit Feast Boutique, do have the capacity to empower participants. They do so by employing a participatory structure, building social capital, and rejecting the individualistic frame that stigmatizes participation in hunger assistance programs. Instead, they opt for a social justice frame that acknowledges systemic inequalities and exposes new possibilities for community-led solutions that empower systemically marginalized people in our society rather than shaming them.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Scholars researching poverty and food insecurity, especially those in the field of community development, are concerned with how these issues are framed. (McCullum et al. 2004). Framing is the process of interpreting and constructing reality (Benford and Snow 2000), which enables us to see situations from different angles or points of view. Powerful groups in

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society have the capacity to “impose their views of reality onto subordinate groups through the generation of social myths, symbols, and control of information” (McCullum et al. 2004:208), thus creating prevailing or dominant frameworks that dictate how people are viewed or how their life circumstances are interpreted.

The dominant framework surrounding poverty and food insecurity blames individual choices and characteristics for landing people in poverty instead of criticizing the macroeconomic structures that maintain inadequate wages, high cost of housing and childcare and unequal distribution of wealth (Curtis 1997; Miraftab 1997; Jacobson 2007; McCullum et al. 2004; Power 1999; Rappaport 1981; Yoon and Hirschl 2015). Thus, most food security programs focus on alleviating an immediate need for food rather than addressing structural inequalities that lead to widespread food insecurity in the first place. Tarasuk argues this is because “it is much more difficult to mount projects that tackle the processes that promote and perpetuate poverty and inequality because these operate at regional, national, and even international levels” (2001:494-5). By ignoring the larger structural implications and focusing only on immediate need, traditional food security programs such as food banks and food pantries frame hunger as an individual struggle instead of a social justice issue (Miraftab 1997; Himmelheber 2014).

Framing

Frames construct meaning, which can shed light on injustices and mobilize collective action and social movements (Benford and Snow 2000). When we change the way a problem is framed it opens up alternative possibilities to solving that problem (Benford and Snow 2000). For example, dominant anti-hunger programs in the United States treating hunger as an individual issue lends itself to solutions regarding individual behavior change, which generates a sense of shame for individuals experiencing hunger (Miraftab 1997; Himmelheber 2014). The

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counter frame of hunger as a symptom of structural inequality steers the blame away from individual actions and looks for solutions to the structural inequality created by our capitalist world economy (Yoon and Hirschl 2015). This new counter frame serves to empower disadvantaged individuals instead of shaming them (Himmelheber 2014). Frameworks manifest in the form of social structures, which influence individuals' attitudes and behaviors; these attitudes and behaviors then reproduce the framework from which they emerged, mutually reinforcing each other in a cycle of social reproduction (Bourdieu 1990).

Pierre Bourdieu coins this social reproduction the *habitus*. Bourdieu explained that “the structures characterizing a determinate class of conditions of existence produce the structures of the *habitus*, which in their turn are the basis of the perception and appreciation of all subsequent experiences. The *habitus*, a product of history, produces individual and collective practices – more history – in accordance with the schemes generated by history” (Bourdieu 1990). Individual behavior influences the social structure, and at the same time, the social structure influences individual behavior. Thus, individual behavior and social structures are mutually reinforcing, creating a “system of dispositions – a present past that tends to perpetuate itself into the future” (Bourdieu 1990). The hunger discourse is evidence of the reciprocal relationship between the social structure and individuals' dispositions. The prevailing framework that sees hunger as an individual issue leads people to experience stigma and shame by participating in food assistance programs (Miraftab 1997; Himmelheber 2014).

The frame that hunger is an individual problem instead of a social justice issue shapes the experiences of food assistance service users and providers (Curtis 1997). A study researching the relationships between food service users and providers found that providers see users as lazy freeloaders who are careless with their money (Curtis 1997). The constant scrutinizing of

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eligibility for services is disempowering and reinforces social hierarchies of power and control (Curtis 1997). Research shows that federal programs such as SNAP and traditional food assistance programs such as soup kitchens and food pantries are not empowering because participants lack control over decisions that affect them directly (Himmelheber 2014). For example, programs often give participants little to no room to exercise choice in what they want to eat, and distribution of food is under strict control of those in charge (Himmelheber 2014). These programs do not target structural change, and often frame providing food as a charity case, which gives providers of food, rather than recipients, the power to shape the interaction's meaning (Himmelheber 2014). The disempowering nature of many traditional food assistance programs has led to a discourse in the academic literature on how to incorporate empowerment theory into food security programs.

Needs, rights, and empowerment frames

Meaning is shaped by lenses or frameworks through which we view the world (Benford and Snow 2000). One example from the literature gives a historical perspective on how the response to and meaning associated with dependent people in our society changes as frameworks surrounding dependency change over time (Rappaport 1981). Dependency frameworks have evolved from the needs model to the rights model and finally to the empowerment model (Rappaport 1981). The needs model and accompanying policies, popular from 1900-1965, placed the state in the role of the parent, resulting in a society where “those in need were more or less like children, to be helped, told what to do, and kept off the streets” (Rappaport 1981:11). The rights model became popular in the 1960's as the Progressive Era, the community mental health movement, and the war on poverty began to emerge (Rappaport 1981). The rights model, embedded in this larger social movement, arose from a new awareness that as humans and

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citizens, dependent people must still be assured their rights and choices (Rappaport 1981), which led the state “to offer fewer services and more rights,” which manifests in the form of advocacy and social responsibility (Rappaport 1981:16).

Framing determines meaning and shapes policies and action according to this meaning. Whether in the form of parenting or advocacy, the needs and rights models both suggest prevention and intervention by professional experts (Rappaport 1981). The current model of empowerment rejects the needs and the rights models as one dimensional, suggesting instead that the many competencies already present, or at least possible, in an oppressed population are hindered by a lack of resources (Rappaport 1981). When given the opportunity people may devise “many simultaneous, different, and contradictory answers, rather than a single solution to every social problem” (Rappaport 1981:16). Empowerment promotes addressing needs specific to a community through a cooperative participatory process (Miraftab 1997). Therefore, NGO’s and community-based organizations working in community development must develop adaptable strategies in order to provide resources while still allowing communities to steer problem solving (Lombe et al. 2016).

In the case of hunger, these varying models and their implications are the difference between framing food insecurity as an individual issue or as an oppressive social condition that systematically disenfranchises a portion of the population. Framing is important, because “it makes a great deal of difference if you are viewed as a child or a citizen, since if you believe it you are quite likely to act the part” (Rappaport 1981:11). In an unconscious way the social structure shapes the behavior of individuals, and individuals’ behavior shapes the social structure (Trigg 2004), which is reflected in Bourdieu’s theory of habitus (Bourdieu 1990).

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Habitus is important in the context of needs, rights, and empowerment frames, because the social structure, or the dominant framework, influences how individuals behave and how their behavior perpetuates a social order or dominant framework across generations. According to Bourdieu's theory, when we move toward a framework of empowerment that recognizes the potential of a disenfranchised population, that new framework or structure influences individuals' attitudes and behavior, which then reinforces the empowerment framework. One way to begin shifting towards this empowerment framework is by fostering individual empowerment through the development of social capital (Himmelheber 2014).

Social Capital

Social capital is incredibly valuable to disenfranchised populations, especially during times of change, challenge, or crisis (Perkins et al. 2002). Social capital is defined as "features of social organization such as networks, norms, and social trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit" (Print and Coleman 2003:124-5). It is used in both the psychological field of community psychology and the sociological field of community development (Perkins, Hughey, and Speer 2002). Thus, social capital is the junction where psychology and sociology intersect. On the ground, "the fields of community psychology and community development share a concern for addressing social problems at the local level... yet, because of disciplinary lineages, each field remains largely ignorant of the other" (Perkins et al. 2002:35). In each field, social capital operates on micro-, meso-, and macro-social levels, and draws on concepts such as empowerment, sense of community, trust, meaning-making, and civic participation (Perkins et al. 2002).

Social capital manifests at the level of personal social relationships and at that of groups, networks, institutions, communities, and societies (Perkins et al. 2002). These levels can be

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understood through individuals' formal and informal attitudes and behaviors (Perkins et al. 2002). The informal consists of a sense of community and neighboring behaviors, while the formal consists of empowerment, or collective efficacy and organized citizen participation (Perkins et al. 2002). Thus, the first of two principal emotions associated with social capital is empowerment, defined as "the development of a sense of collective efficacy, or control over the institutions that affect one's life" (Perkins et al. 2002:37). The second is a sense of community, defined as "an attitude of bonding, or mutual trust and belonging, with other members of one's group or locale." (Perkins et al. 2002:37). Research shows that high levels of social capital indicate a healthy and well-functioning society (Print and Coleman 2003). This health and functionality is demonstrated by neighboring behavior and formal citizen participation, which are the principal behaviors associated with social capital. Neighboring behavior is "the instrumental help we provide, or get from, other community members: for instance, watching a neighbor's house or child," (Perkins et al. 2002:39) is the strongest predictor for formal citizen participation in grassroots organizations (Perkins et al. 2002).

Through formal (citizen participation) and informal (neighboring) behaviors, communities foster a network of social support (Perkins et al. 2002). The literature identifies

three different kinds of social support functions: communal (shared expectations, values, or world view; e.g., sense of community); instrumental (tangible or task oriented assistance; e.g., neighboring); and informational (access to new information and contacts; Levine & Perkins, 1997). The fourth form of support, emotional, may also be involved, depending on the quality of one's relationships with community members (Perkins et al. 2002:40).

Neighboring behaviors and citizen participation, as well as the support that arises from them, are empowering for the individual and the community as a whole (Perkins et al. 2002). This empowerment and social capital leads "community members to engage professionals as collaborators rather than as authoritative experts" (Perkins et al. 2002:39). This further empowers

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individuals through their participation in empowered organizations and communities (Perkins et al. 2002). Empowering participants at the individual level and empowering organizations at the community level are mutually reinforcing, again echoing Bourdieu's theory of habitus (Bourdieu 1990).

Empowerment Through Alternative Food Assistance Programs

Research shows that by “promoting community self-reliance and empowerment through supporting community based groups and relying on participatory process” (Miraftab 1997:361) NGO's can empower disadvantaged communities as they provide services (Miraftab 1997). Specifically, with food assistance services, researchers have found that community gardens, community kitchens and food-rescue programs are empowering to participants.

Community gardens and kitchens are often self-run and alleviate stress and fear associated with future food insecurity, enable learning about gardening and nutrition, and most importantly give participants control over the source of their food (Himmelheber 2014). This community engagement extends beyond the garden and enables people to build relationships, social networks and a stronger sense of community (Himmelheber 2014). With both community gardens and community kitchens, the presence of a physical communal space allows relationships and networks to flourish, thus empowering community members (Himmelheber 2014).

Food rescue programs

Food rescue programs empower people through networking on a larger scale by partnering local food donors with recipients, and enabling the coexisting problems of hunger and food waste to help solve each other (Himmelheber 2014). These programs rescue food that would otherwise go to waste from donor organizations and deliver it directly to recipient

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organizations. Food rescue programs empower participants by framing participation as essential to solving the overwhelming issue of food waste (Himmelheber 2014) and creating a network of organizations working for similar goals. Alternative food assistance programs put agency in the hands of participants by providing an independent shopping atmosphere, giving them the power to choose foods they want, and considering their input in program decision making (Himmelheber 2014). Food rescue programs such as D.C Central Kitchen (DCCK) use rescued food to provide culinary job-skills training and then help participants find employment (Himmelheber 2014). While food rescue programs are inextricably tied to the excess produced by the industrial food system and thus are limited in their capacity to create a new social order, they do have the capacity to empower participants (Himmelheber 2014).

Participatory Action Research (PAR)

One way to empower participants, in food rescue programs and otherwise, is by directly engaging them as citizen researchers (Jacobson, Pruitt-Chapin, and Rugeley 2009). A key feature of empowerment theory is allowing space for the input of all people affected by an issue in identifying the problems and possible solutions (Jacobson et al. 2009). Giving food insecure people control over how to frame the food security discourse in research itself gives them the power to address problems and identify sustainable solutions (Jacobson 2007; Jacobson et al. 2009). It is a form of citizen politics in which different stakeholders with varying perspectives come together to create a shared understanding of an issue and viable solutions (McCullum et al. 2002).

In one qualitative example of PAR from the academic literature, citizens, in this case, food service users, work with researchers to define a research question and methods, conduct the research, and analyze the data to identify findings (Israel et al. 1992). This reframing of citizens

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as experts on the food insecurity they experience empowers a systemically marginalized group (Israel, Schurman, and Hugentobler 1992; Jacobson et al. 2009), and participants in this study reported feeling as though their voice was finally heard (Jacobson et al. 2009). In another example of PAR, community members came together for a community food assessment to inform and educate one another, and share ideas for possible courses of action to achieve community food security (Jacobson 2007). Since PAR has been shown to empower citizen researchers (Israel et al. 1992; Jacobson et al. 2009), existing scholars are calling for more PAR designed to evaluate and improve hunger assistance services (Rappaport 1981; Sloane et al. 2003).

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Knowledge Gaps

Within the hunger assistance literature, there is a clear call for more research evaluating existing food security programs (Larson, Story, and Nelson 2009; Ostrander 1985; Tarasuk 2001), especially community based food security initiatives intended to empower participants (McCullum et al. 2004). Specifically, the literature shows that there is a lack of qualitative research in the field of food security programming (Curits 1997). Research that “includes and values the voices of people who know poverty firsthand and those whose daily practice brings them in direct contact with the inadequacies of social policies and programs” (Jacobson et al. 2009:17) can help reconstruct poverty knowledge and devise creative solutions.

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Further research should focus on the centrality of social capital and relationship building in empowerment theory (Lombe et al. 2016). Literature suggests that future researchers continue

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to use the lens of empowerment theory (Himmelheber 2014, Israel et al. 1994; Rappaport 1981) and PAR (Rappaport 1981; Sloane 2003) to evaluate existing programs. The literature also calls for interdisciplinary collaboration between community psychology and community development, focusing specifically on social capital (Manzo and Perkins 2006; Perkins et al. 2002). Finally, the literature calls for researchers to recognize and respond to larger social structures that reproduce systemic inequalities manifesting in widespread food insecurity and the need for hunger assistance services (Jacobson 2007; Power 1999; Tarasuk 2001; Yoon and Hirschl 2015).

There are few studies that focus on individual and community empowerment through alternative food security programs. To address this gap, I conducted a qualitative, community-based research project that explored the capacity of one alternative food security program, Fit Feast Boutique, to empower participants by reframing the dominant individualistic hunger framework as a larger social issue and fostering community engagement and social capital through a participatory structure. In addition, I explored how this alternative food assistance program interacts with larger structural inequalities that determine the need for its existence.

METHODS

In order to examine the capacity that alternative food assistance programs have to empower participants, I worked with a local nonprofit, Clover Creek Food Rescue, whose mission is to increase health equity in Clover Creek, Colorado. By connecting food donors and recipient organizations, CCFR redirects fresh healthy food that would otherwise go to waste to hungry people in the community. CCFR pairs grocery stores with local communities to create community projects called grocery programs. The Lotus Park Community Center is a neighborhood facility that offers no cost and low cost programs for all community members from

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preschoolers to senior citizens, and partners with CCFR to bring a grocery program, Fit Feast Boutique, to the community.

To establish a research question, I worked with Adam, the executive director of CCFR, to identify gaps in the knowledge CCFR had of its grocery programs. In my previous work with Food Rescue, first as a volunteer and then as an intern, I developed relationships with Food Rescue employees and a familiarity with the organization. While I am the sole researcher, I incorporated elements of PAR by collaborating with a non-researcher citizen, Adam, to identify a research question. At first, we asked how participants experience and conceive of Fit Feast Boutique. As I explored existing literature and began collecting data, it became clear that the more specific and relevant research question at hand was how alternative food assistance programs, like grocery programs, have the capacity to empower program participants.

In an effort to incorporate stakeholders' ideas or questions into the research, I reached out to Food Rescue employees and Lotus Park Community Center employees to see if they had specific questions they would like me to explore in my interviews. A qualitative research project emerged in which I interviewed all two Food Rescue employees, three Community Center employees and three Lotus Park Community members.

Recruitment

Due to language barriers and concerns about vulnerable populations among many of the Food Rescue grocery programs, Adam decided it would be best to do a case study on Lotus Park Community Center's Fit Feast Boutique. I visited Fit Feast Boutique to familiarize myself with the program, and the space and to introduce myself to community members and community leaders. I met Amy, the main organizer of Fit Feast Boutique, and explained my preliminary idea for research: to interview various players in Fit Feast Boutique to explore how different

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stakeholders make meaning of the program they are participating in and how they see it evolving in the future.

When I attended the next Fit Feast Boutique at Lotus Park Community Center, Amy introduced me to the crowd of people gathered to pick up food. I explained that I wanted to interview community members about Fit Feast Boutique so that we may take their experiences and opinions into account in trying to further the program and encouraged people to approach me if they wanted to learn more about the research or if they were interested in participating. When approached, I explained that participation entailed being interviewed about their view of Fit Feast Boutique, pros and cons of the program, and aspirations for how the program could evolve.

Five community members approached me to participate in the study and I recorded their contact information. Amy agree to participate, as did Harrison, who teaches the nutrition class at Fit Feast Boutique and is the assistant director of youth programs. My interview with Harrison shed light on other programs at the Community Center that use a participatory structure to empower participants. I then interviewed Kevin, the director of youth programs to gain perspective on other Community Center programs.

Sample

The sample consisted of eight participants: two Food Rescue employees, three Community Center employees, and three Lotus Park community members who regularly participate in Fit Feast Boutique. The diversity of the sample is both an advantage and a limitation. Interviewing different stakeholders allowed me to gain insight on three different perspectives, that of Food Rescue employees, Community Center employees, and Lotus Park community members. Since the number of participants in each category was small, it was difficult to generalize the viewpoints expressed among each stakeholder group. Due to the time

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constraint of the study, I interviewed eight participants. All of the participants self-identified as White or Caucasian except for Harrison, the nutritionist at Fit Feast Boutique, who identifies as biracial Black and White. The names of all organizations, locations, participants, and any other identifying titles were changed to ensure confidentiality.

Instrument

Three open-ended interview guides were drafted for the project: one for Food Rescue employees, one for Community Center employees and one for community members. Interview guides were included in the IRB proposal for my research, which was approved. Relevant documents such as Food Rescue flyers and webpages were informally analyzed to gain a better understanding of the programs.

In the interviews I asked Food Rescue employees about their position in Food Rescue, how to start a grocery program, their challenges, goals, and perceived impacts and thoughts about the future of the programs. Interviews with Food Rescue employees shed light on the role they play in Fit Feast Boutique, which is very minimal, and I realized that Food Rescue employees were to provide many specifics about Fit Feast Boutique. As a result, these interviews focused on the development of grocery programs more generally, as well as Food Rescue's larger goals as an organization.

I asked Community Center employees about their role at the Community Center and the Fit Feast Boutique specifically and how it has evolved over time, challenges they encounter, opportunities for improvement, and feedback they received from Lotus Park community members who participate in the programs. In interviews with Lotus Park community members I focused on their experiences with Fit Feast Boutique, including pros and cons, how they engaged in the program, and relationship building through their involvement at Community Center.

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Interviews with Food Rescue employees were conducted in a conference room on campus. The rest of the interviews were conducted in a conference room at the Lotus Park Community Center, with the exception of one interview with a Lotus Park community member, which was conducted in the participant's home. The length of each interview fell between 38-80 minutes. Each participant signed a consent form. I audio recorded and transcribed interviews with the permission of participants.

Analysis

The data analyzed were collected through one-on-one interviews. Interviews were transcribed verbatim using Express Scribe. Interview data were coded for 20 themes: difference from other hunger assistance programs, participatory structure / autonomy, building trust, resources / support, empowerment, building community, goals, insider / outsider, bigger systematic problem, gratitude, limitation, impact, stigma / shame, power dynamics, education, social capital, sense of belonging, sense of ownership, stability and accommodation. Quotes used in the final paper were edited by eliminating the word "like" when it did not serve as a verb, and eliminating repeated words, "uh's," "um's," and "you know's," for clarity.

Limitations

My position as an outsider who has attended Fit Feast Boutique but not received groceries may have affected the interview data collected. It is possible that interviewees did not feel the need to explain in detail how the event was run because they knew I had been witness to it. It is equally possible that because I am an outsider who was not attending Fit Feast Boutique for the groceries, participants may not have painted a full picture of the stigma and shame surrounding food insecurity in their community. While I did not disclose my socioeconomic status to participants, I did inform them that I attend Colorado College. Since Colorado College

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is well known as an expensive, liberal institution, participants may have inferred my socioeconomic status and political disposition.

Another limitation is in my sample of interviewees. Food Rescue has only two employees, and I interviewed both of them. While I interviewed three Community Center staff and three Lotus Park community members, there are approximately eight Community Center staff and approximately 40 Lotus Park community members who attend Fit Feast Boutique. Thus, while I interviewed the same number of staff as community members, I interviewed a greater percentage of the entire staff than the community. Therefore, I gained a more complete and comprehensive picture of Food Rescue and Community Center employees' experiences and beliefs than those of the Lotus Park community members.

(Background): Fit Feast Boutique at the Lotus Park Community Center

Fit Feast Boutique operates out of Lotus Park Community Center and is one of five community-led grocery programs in Clover Creek, CO. These programs were launched by a local health equity nonprofit, Clover Creek Food Rescue. Food Rescue uses GIS software to map out locations of grocery stores around Clover Creek and identify the food deserts, or communities that do not have access to a nearby grocery store. Food deserts tend to exist in economically challenged neighborhoods (U.S. Census 2014). According to the U.S. Census Bureau, in the state of Colorado, 12.4% of families have an income of \$25,000 or less, which is the approximate poverty line for a family of four (U.S. Census 2014). In the Lotus Park community, 26.4% of families live on \$25,000 or less, a 14% increase in poverty compared to the state average (U.S. Census 2014). By identifying the food deserts in Clover Creek, Food Rescue pinpoints poverty-stricken neighborhoods most in need of resources.

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Clover Creek Food Rescue differs from traditional hunger assistance services by using a direct redistribution model to bring fresh, healthy food directly from food donors to recipients. Sam, one of the organization's founders, "saw healthy food going to waste that couldn't be picked up by existing hunger assistance organizations that didn't deal with prepared food or really perishable foods at all." Food Rescue employees coordinate volunteers to pick up the excess food and deliver it to the designated community, then puts power in the hands of the community to organize and distribute the groceries. As a result, programs have evolved to meet respective communities' needs and desires. Programs operate in a variety of locales, including mobile home parks, community centers, and schools.

Fit Feast Boutique is the grocery program at Lotus Park Community Center. In addition to the grocery shopping, participants are welcome to attend a short nutrition class before shopping begins. Fit Feast Boutique, along with other programs offered at the Lotus Park Community Center, strives to facilitate community building, individual and community empowerment, and a sense of belonging.

FINDINGS

Through in-depth interviews about Fit Feast Boutique, I found that program organizers reject the dominant framework that hunger is an individual issue and the accompanying stigma associated with participation in food assistance programs. Instead, Food Rescue and Community Center employees recognize that hunger is a symptom of systemic inequality, and thereby focus on an empowerment framework that mitigates the existing stigma by emphasizing a participatory structure and the building of social capital.

"We're not a food pantry" Overcoming Stigma and Shame Through a Different Frame

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Fit Feast Boutique organizers reject the existing framework that hunger is an individual issue, and instead opt for a social justice framework that empowers participants rather than stigmatizing them. Due to the dominant framework that blames individuals' actions for poverty and food insecurity, participation in hunger assistance programs is marked by a sense of stigma and shame. Nolan, a Fit Feast Boutique participant, explicitly said, "some people feel ashamed for asking for handouts, needing help and stuff." According to Adam, Food Rescue's executive director, "the sheer level of shame that's rooted around food assistance in our country, in our hyper individualistic country" shapes the way we view food assistance and those in need of it. According to one Community Center employee, Kevin, this manifests in a "heightened sense of anxiety from economics and the pressures that are on." Kevin also brought attention to the fact that, "that libertarian ideology infects everything," especially in the conservative city of Clover Creek.

It can be shameful, stigmatizing, and disempowering to have one's eligibility scrutinized by food service providers. One participant, Nolan, told me, "I only get \$74 of food stamps. I used to get \$177, they took \$103 away from me to give to somebody else. Okay. And that aint right for a person with health problems. I have diabetes. I have heart problems. I need that extra \$103." Amy, the program director for Fit Feast Boutique, understands this dynamic of stigma and shame, so she chooses not to question the eligibility of people who participate in Fit Feast Boutique. At first, she said, participants "were a little overwhelmed by it and unsure just because they're used to having to go through a stringent program of filling out a lot of paperwork and meeting the criteria... [but here] if you feel that you have a need to come we're not going to ask any more questions of you, only that you know that you need to share [the food]." This no-

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questions-asked philosophy is part of a direct opposition to traditional hunger assistance programs such as food banks and food pantries.

Another way in which Fit Feast Boutique diverges from the shame-inducing food pantry model is by offering a nutrition class each week, which frames the program as an educational opportunity as well as a place to get groceries. The nutritional component and the name Fit Feast Boutique help to mitigate the stigma and shame associated with hunger assistance. Harrison, the nutritionist at Fit Feast Boutique, said, “it’s a little word game that separates that [FFB from other programs] so that way the people who are prideful are not hurting their pride by coming.” The name Fit Feast Boutique puts as much emphasis on fitness as food, and calling it a boutique makes it far more welcoming and approachable than food pantry or food bank.

Food Rescue employees and Community Center employees who coordinate weekly food distribution directly reject the traditional food bank or food pantry model. Harrison stated, “we’re also trying to avoid the food pantry label because we’re not a food pantry.” Amy expanded in saying, “[when] you put it on a pantry shelf and it takes on a different life, it’s very impersonal and we want it to be personal.” In place of the impersonal food pantry model, Amy aims to create a more personal space that is not just about supplying food, but also about facilitating social capital, food-related education, and a participatory structure. This emphasis on social capital, education, and participation is part of the new framework focused on empowering participants instead of shaming them.

According to Adam, Food Rescue’s executive director, “there’s something very disruptive about this, about the grocery program, because when you’re talking about generational poverty you’re talking about assistance of food pantries that are extraordinarily problematic but have been in place since the 70’s now.” Thus, entwined with the rejection of the food pantry

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model is a recognition of larger social and economic factors that contribute to widespread food insecurity. Food Rescue's employees recognize that food access and food justice are inextricably intertwined with economic justice. Sam, one of Food Rescue's founders, acknowledged that

in the end what we need to be looking at is the source of the problem, and right now we recognize that we're largely treating symptoms of a bigger problem, which is why are people lacking access to healthy food in the first place? So in the future what we're trying to focus on is also an economic justice piece of this... these are sort of bigger picture problems that we need to make sure that we're not forgetting about as we treat immediate needs.

Similarly, Adam stated that "the wider structural thing that I see and that our organization sees is health inequities in our city and barriers to healthy living in our city, and that's not just about food but food is sort of the core thing that can help bring those things together." Recognizing that widespread hunger is a symptom of structural inequality is effectively rejecting the frame that food insecurity is an individual problem. As grocery programs evolve, Food Rescue is working on providing compensation for the community leaders who step forward to help run the grocery programs in their communities, "thus providing some of that economic justice and choice," according to Sam.

Sam expressed that a community center is an ideal location for a grocery program because it already has paid staff who are happy to organize a grocery program to help support their community. Furthermore, Sam said community centers are "a trusted space and folks who work at the community center already have relationships built with folks in the community." Kevin, the director of youth programs at the Community Center, said, "I think people see us as a safe place, you know, so it's not just about food distribution." This trust and relationship building are key to expanding the program to go beyond just providing food to participants. Trust is the foundation for building social capital and establishing an effective participatory structure, which are the foundation for empowering participants.

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Participatory Structure

Comment [MP(10)]: Change to Fit Feast Boutique?

The participatory structure is essential to empowerment because it gives participants the power to control aspects of the program. By putting power in the hands of participants, Food Rescue seeks to facilitate cooperative grocery programs that engage community members. Sam explained that “the end goal is really to flip the traditional charity model on its head and empower people through community building and through participatory structures.” At Fit Feast Boutique, this participatory structure operates on multiple levels. The first is the autonomy that Amy, who runs the program, has over the organization and evolution of the program. Sam was pleased to tell me that each of Food Rescue’s five grocery programs is evolving to be a “really participatory, resident-driven, community led program that takes on a life of its own.” This participatory structure allows community leaders to run the program in a way that best suits community members’ needs.

For example, Amy is able to set food aside so that she can accommodate community members’ unexpected or emergency needs during the week. Amy said, “it’s almost weekly that I’ll have somebody say that they’re having a problem, and that’s huge to me because that means the trust thing, that means that they’re feeling comfortable enough that they can come and say we’re having an issue and can you help me out in this, and I don’t turn anybody away.” These instances in which participants step forward and ask that the program adapt to their needs is not only an expression of trust, but a display of control and empowerment.

Mirroring the autonomy that Food Rescue gives Amy to run the program as she sees fit, Amy structures the program in such a way that community members can choose to actively participate in and shape the program in various ways. One community member, Brenda, reported that “Amy even says if we have anything that might make it better to let her know.” Harrison

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runs a short nutrition class before grocery shopping begins and participants are invited to question, comment, and suggest topics for future classes. The opportunity to control the information they want to learn is key because exercising control over institutions and programs that affect one's life empowers individuals (Perkins et al. 2002). Harrison reported that, "when it comes to the information and what they want to learn about or what they're curious about that's when they come to me," and that "after the talks, when they're going through [the grocery shopping] they'll talk and ask each other questions." When asked about the nutrition class, Brenda said, "one of my main things is to try to be here when Harrison talks so I can hear what he has to say." This demonstrates that participants are engaging with staff and each other and actively seeking to educate themselves.

Nolan, a participant and longtime resident of the community, described the nutrition class as "a chance to learn [and] broaden our horizons and knowledge," and another participant, Charlie, described learning about a healthy balanced diet, food groups, and food preparation. Brenda, recounted, "the other day [Harrison] did carbohydrates and protein and stuff like that and I missed that day and he went over it with me afterwards," and another time, "I got a blood clot and so he gave me some foods and stuff that maybe I shouldn't be eating, so that was really helpful." In Brenda's case, access to a nutritionist allowed her to gain personal insight on a health issue she had, and for all of the participants, the educational component allowed them bring knowledge gained at Fit Feast Boutique into their everyday lives and kitchens at home.

As another way to incorporate Fit Feast Boutique at home, Amy encouraged participants to submit written recipes that used foods they received at Fit Feast Boutique, and in return for a recipe they received a cloth grocery bag with the Food Rescue logo on it. Amy has had a bit of trouble getting it off the ground, and said, "they'll talk to me about their recipes but they're not

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writing them out yet.” Even so, she insisted that participants write out their own recipes because, she said, “I want them to recognize that this is important. If I write it down, it loses that importance and that importance to them. If they write it down, then there’s that personal in it and they’ll connect to it and that helps them to connect to the foods.” Once enough recipes are submitted, Amy planned to create a brochure that participants can take home from Fit Feast Boutique along with their groceries. This example shows that Fit Feast Boutique is a program that goes beyond simply providing food to participants; it encourages them to connect with their food by participating in the program.

When shopping begins, tables are set up along the walls with paper and plastic bags and sections for produce, bread, dairy, eggs, and meat, much like a supermarket. Participants are given an independent shopping experience with Amy’s only restriction being, “if there’s five of one product please don’t take all five of them, understand that there’s other people wanting to experience that and to consume that, too.” She said, “I even hear them talking to each other about, or reminding each other, ‘well you just took four of those and could you put one back please.’” Instead of rules being set in terms of what is right or wrong for an individual, Amy frames it in terms of community well-being.

Participants in the program internalize these guidelines in their own way. Brenda said, “I’ve even opened stuff up and just taken one, ‘cause I don’t need six of something with just myself.” Charlie recounted, “last week they had some canned goods out, like green beans and corn, and one of the older people was taking three or four cans of the corn or green beans and then another lady was saying, ‘you can only take one! You can only take one!’” These anecdotes show that in a participatory structure, community members step forward and exercise leadership to keep the program running smoothly.

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Fit Feast Boutique is not the only program at the Community Center that facilitates leadership through a participatory structure. In the youth programs, Community Center employees empower younger members of the community and teach them to exercise leadership abilities. Kevin and Harrison run the summer camps and afterschool programs for youth, and Harrison said, “we give them a couple of options and we let them choose what they want to do.” First, Kevin said, “we try to set up as many activities as we can to give them choices.” In each of these activities, there is another level of choice. For example, when a group of children goes to play games in the gym, Harrison randomly chooses a child and asks them what game they want to play, and then they all play it. Harrison said, this conveys that “I value their input, I like their ideas,” and randomly selecting a child to choose the game for the whole group requires each child to step up and be a leader at some point. Again, exercising control empowers individuals (Himmelheber 2014), and children are no exception.

Kevin told me, this “makes them feel empowered in terms of their own educational choices.” When these children cannot exercise choice in many other areas of their life, it becomes especially important for them to have choice in their activities at the Community Center. Kevin informed me that “if there’s no economic opportunity at home, it affects everything the kid does. It affects the clothes they wear, the foods they eat... You can’t wash your clothes because you can’t afford detergent. There’s so much stuff you just can’t do because of these economic blocks, and that stuff is manifesting itself in seven and eight year old kids all the time.” Affording the children choice in the afterschool and summer camp programs helps to mitigate the lack of choice that many of these children experience at home.

Building trust is imperative to engaging the children in the participatory structure. Kevin said he is especially conscious not to talk down to kids, “not to pull the adult card too often,” and

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to “make sure that kids are being treated like people first.” This entails being emotionally honest with the children, and Kevin said, “[if] I’m being sincere and honest with you then you will have a better chance to respond to me that way, which is what I would like.” This trust and relationship building is essential to engaging children and thus empowering them through a participatory structure. It is important that Kevin teaches the children sincere and honest communication because this is the foundation for building social capital, which is also shown to empower individuals and communities (Perkins et al. 2002).

Social Capital

The educational component, the participatory structure and the rejection of the individualistic frame create a communion over food that has the capacity to facilitate empowerment through relationship building and community connection. Amy said, “the food itself gathers folks together, that’s the base of what gathers folks together.” Since then, Fit Feast Boutique has evolved to become “kind of a gathering meal place,” which Sam, a Food Rescue employee, described as “a big community hub of learning and education.” According to Harrison, “you can’t really build your [wider] community unless you are a community within your community,” and to do so, the staff uses some of the rescued food to cook and share a meal together once a week. Sam is invited to this weekly meal and said it serves “as a thank-you to the staff and as a way to eat together, break bread together and talk.” Thus, Fit Feast Boutique not only fosters engagement and a sense of community within the wider Lotus Park community, but also within the smaller community of Community Center employees. Amy said this is a way to “nurture the staff who then nurture the children that are here,” and according to Harrison, “the staff is as much a family as the youth are a family to the center.” This understanding of the

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community as a tight knit, family-like network fosters behaviors and attitudes linked to social capital.

Participants in Fit Feast Boutique demonstrated both formal and informal attitudes and behaviors associated with social capital: empowerment, citizen participation, neighboring and sense of community (Perkins et al. 2002). Many of the participants I interviewed practiced or expressed these behaviors and attitudes, and the most prevalent of these is neighboring behavior. Charlie, a regular Fit Feast Boutique participant, said, “I’ve told my neighbors here about [Fit Feast Boutique]...sometimes if I pick up a little extra stuff I’ll deliver it to my neighbors just to help.” Brenda also reported spreading the word about Fit Feast Boutique, telling her neighbors that “they have very healthy food and if they ever need some food or something to come over and check it out.” Other neighboring behavior she mentioned included a car pooling arrangement, in which her “neighbor usually gets a ride over and then I can come pick her up.” Kevin, a Community Center employee, recounted neighboring behavior he experienced in saying, “a guy across the street, man, I did a couple favors for his kids and stuff and now I got these guys going, ‘Kevin if you ever need anything, like anything...I’ll work on your car, I’ll do anything to help you, man.’” Since neighboring behavior is a predictor for formal citizen participation (Perkins et al. 2002), it is no surprise that the Lotus Park community members who engage in informal neighboring behavior also attend the Community Center for Fit Feast Boutique and other programs.

In addition to these behaviors, participants exhibited a sense of community and empowerment, which are attitudes associated with social capital (Perkins et al. 2002). Nolan expressed that Fit Feast Boutique “helps me personally to get out of the house and meet other people” and that “it brings people together.” Brenda told me, “I’ve met quite a few new people

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there,” and Charlie said, “I’ve been going up there for over five years, so I know everybody there, and a lot of the new people that show up, I talk to them about some of the food.” These narratives show that in addition to receiving food, participants build social capital by attending Fit Feast Boutique.

The three kinds of social support functions, communal, instrumental, informational, and emotional (Perkins et al. 2002), are also achieved through Fit Feast Boutique. Communal social support is exhibited by the sense of community described by Nolan, in which Fit Feast Boutique “brings people together.” Instrumental social support is exhibited by the neighboring behavior described above, in which Charlie brought his neighbors groceries and Brenda picked her neighbor up from Fit Feast Boutique. Informational social support is exhibited by the nutritional education program, in which participants described learning about a balanced diet, food groups, and food preparation, and gaining insight on their personal health issues.

Emotional social support is also achieved through participation in Fit Feast Boutique and the relationships built there. Kevin informed me that “people come to us with a lot of their emotional problems...or whatever happens to be burdening them, and they talk to Bennett [director of the Community Center] and I or they talk to Ashley [Community Center employee]. We know what’s going on with people’s lives.” For example, Nolan, a Fit Feast Boutique participant, told me, “Bennett and I discussed why I’m single, he understands where I’m coming from.” These examples illustrate the emotional social support cultivated through relationships built at Fit Feast Boutique. Emotional, informational, instrumental, and communal social support functions create a community that is rich with social capital.

At Fit Feast Boutique, Amy wants participants to feel that “there’s a network here, that we are a community, a family,” and runs the program in a way that fosters interpersonal

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relationships as well as relationships between people and their food. The following narrative

Amy told me about one participant, Nolan, illustrates this process:

I get him to eat something that they maybe never have eaten before, like a tomato, and slice it a different way or crush it. Just that process is a real connection for them. They'll even come back and talk about that, like, you know, I crushed it and it was really kind of nice, and jeez, how it sounded or what is tasted like after I crushed it as opposed to, I usually just eat it this way, I'll cut it penny wise or I'll just eat it like an apple, and now it tastes different and I really like that. That's, like, my new favorite food [laugh]. It's like, wow, okay. That's your miracle thing. That's the ones you wait for, the ones that you know they're getting it... and then they start talking to each other, "what did you do with this?" And that's what we want is that community connection.

This story illustrates Amy and Nolan's relationship, which is one of the many bonds Amy has formed with Fit Feast Boutique participants. It is also indicative of the relationship that is evolving between Nolan and his food, as well as the relationships that are evolving within the community stemming from a mutual connection to Fit Feast Boutique. This connection, relationship building, and learning about food is contingent on a foundation of trust between program administrators and participants.

DISCUSSION

Existing academic literature on hunger and food security programming calls for more qualitative studies that evaluate current programs through the lens of empowerment theory (Himmelheber 2014; Israel 1994; Rappaport 1981). This research project addresses the aforementioned gap in the literature by exploring the capacity of an alternative hunger assistance program, Fit Feast Boutique, to empower participants. Fit Feast Boutique rejects the individualistic framework that contributes to the stigma and shame surrounding participation in food security programs, instead adopting a framework of hunger as a social justice issue, which

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empowers participants through a participatory structure and the development of social capital. This research adds to the existing academic literature and the field of community development by exploring tactics that programs can use to empower participants. These tactics are reframing the poverty discourse, employing a participatory structure, and building social capital. While this project focuses on alternative food security programming, these tactics are not confined to hunger assistance services and could be used to empower disenfranchised populations through other programs as well.

The data I gathered and findings I identified were limited by my position as an outsider. My standpoint as a student at a well-known, prestigious college and a guest at Fit Feast Boutique who was not there to receive groceries positioned me at a distance from the food-insecure participants that I interviewed. Fit Feast Boutique participants may have felt more comfortable talking about their experiences with or opinions of the program with another participant or another Lotus Park community member who was uninvolved in the program. Data concerning sensitive topics, such as narratives on direct experiences with stigma and shame, could be expanded in future research if interviewees feel more at ease with their interviewer. The sheer level of shame involved in recounting a stigmatizing experience is in itself enough to deter participants from relaying such stories.

Future researchers in this field should strive to design participatory action research (PAR) projects that incorporate citizen participation in each step of the research process: identifying a research question, designing methods, gathering, coding, and analyzing data, and identifying findings. PAR directly incorporates citizen researchers into the discourse that frames their lives and has been shown to empower the citizens it serves (Jacobson et al. 2009). By incorporating citizens into empowerment research, we may be able to unearth experiences of stigma and shame

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experienced in food pantries and track the transition to experiences of empowerment in alternative programs like Fit Feast Boutique.

Future research should also focus more heavily on the interaction between the participatory structure, the building of social capital, and the rejection of the individualistic framework in favor of the social justice framework. Bourdieu's theory of habitus suggests that social structures shape individual behaviors, which in turn shape social structures, perpetuating a cycle of mutually reinforcing social structures and behaviors (Bourdieu 1990). As scholars continue to adopt the empowerment framework, future research should evaluate the capacity of this framework to shape individuals' behavior; whether these behaviors can reinforce the empowerment framework; and creating a new cycle of social structures and individual behaviors that mutually reinforce each other. In the context of Fit Feast Boutique participants, further interviews could investigate a possible correlation between trust and the building of relationships over time and an increased level of engagement in the participatory structure.

I speculate that rejecting the existing individualistic framework in favor of a social justice framework, engagement in a participatory structure, and increasing social capital may all increasingly reinforce each other and give way to a new empowerment framework surrounding food insecurity, opening up a myriad of comprehensive solutions to this rampant problem.

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Comment [MP(11)]: Cite properly ~ if I include it at all, otherwise take it out

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Comment [Office12]: Good example of PAR below, but not sure you need the quantitative research sentence – if it's very relevant, explain why. Right now its relevance unclear.

Comment [Office13]: In one quantitative study

Comment [Office14]: No citations here, why? If not cited it should not be in the literature review. Where does this knowledge come from?