Negotiating dignity and social justice in community food access spaces

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Abstract

Purpose – *This study aims to explore how key stakeholders and recipients of local food access programs operate strategically to meet individual and community food needs, enhance experiences of dignity and promote social justice. The study of a fragmented community food system highlights the connections between micro and meso dimensions of food access, illustrating how people work around food system limitations to access food.*

Design/methodology/approach – *Using qualitative in-depth interviews with food assistance managers, workers, volunteers and recipients, this study examines the period before the implementation of a centralized community-based food access initiative in a mid-sized, rural Oklahoma college town with a high rate of food insecurity. This study asks: What are community members' experiences in a fragmented food assistance system? In what ways do individuals use everyday resistance and workarounds to actively promote experiences of dignity and social justice in food access spaces?*

Findings – *Those involved in sites of community food access build important networks to share information and engage in negotiation and trade to gain access to useful food resources. As forms of everyday resistance, such practices encourage co-construction of dignity and social justice in stigmatized spaces.*

Originality/value – *This research contributes to literature examining micro- and meso-level community dynamics that inform agency, dignity and social justice in community food access approaches.*

Keywords *Food access, Food insecurity, Social justice, Dignity, Everyday resistance, Workarounds, Social networks, Community-based food initiatives*

Paper type *Research paper*

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Introduction

Food security is a central component, a "community need" (Gottlieb and Fisher, 1996, p. 24), of sustainable and resilient communities. Access to sufficient, adequate and nutritious food is essential to enhancing dignity and promoting social justice. Mixed efforts to mitigate the effects of and combat food insecurity illustrate connections between the individual and the collective, reflecting the "social context" of food (Booth *et al.*, 2018, p. 2838). The United States Department of Agriculture reported that, in 2021, 33.8 million people in the USA experienced food insecurity representing 12.5% of US households (Coleman-Jensen *et al.*, 2022).

Food assistance programs encompass a range of services and include the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC), food banks and food pantries, among others. Researchers note persistent stigma associated with food assistance use (Poppendieck, 1998; Whitley, 2013; Greer *et al.*, 2016; de Souza, 2019; Freudenberg *et al.*, 2019; Bowen *et al.*, 2022) indicating that recipients may feel marginalized as part of "a social class that is less deserving than the general population" (Rizvi *et al.*, 2022, p. 6).

People experiencing food insecurity and/or in vulnerable situations develop strategies to cope with limited food options (Oldewage-Theron *et al.*, 2020), participate in community

food projects (Bedore, 2018) or preserve their sense of dignity by maintaining "normal" food practices (Share, 2019). These efforts can be understood as everyday resistance and workarounds, ways to engage both with and around existing food system rules to maximize positive food outcomes. Workarounds are inherent to insufficient food systems (Ginsburg et al., 2019; Raridon et al., 2021) and highlight people's ability to deploy alternative strategies to meet their needs, thereby reflecting a "right-to-food approach to food security" (Mechlem, 2004, p. 648), sometimes outside of established rules.

We conducted semi-structured interviews with key participants of food assistance spaces in a rural Oklahoma college town. Participants include as follows:

- stakeholders such as board members, employees and volunteers who manage food resources and represent meso dimensions (i.e. how resource spaces are organized and operate); and

- recipients who use the resources and represent micro dimensions (i.e. individual attitudes and practices within food spaces).

Aiming to better understand externally defined resistance (Hollander and Einwohner, 2004), we ask: What are community members' experiences in a fragmented food assistance system? In what ways do individuals use everyday resistance and workarounds to actively promote experiences of dignity and social justice in food access spaces?

Bowen and colleagues (2022) note that limited research has explicitly described experiences with food insecurity. Our paper adds to their longitudinal study of access to food among lower-income rural households by providing insight into interconnected experiences with fragmented food assistance spaces in a rural area. Specifically, we agree with Share's (2019, p. 138) idea of a "dynamic relationship between people, space and food" and discuss how what is often considered a stigmatized activity can be transformed into a dignified practice through workarounds and community ties. We argue that the actions and decisions of individuals within food assistance programs represent "a collection of ways or methods of resistance that people are familiar with, know of, understand and are able to handle" (Johansson and Vinthagen, 2016, p. 6), thereby challenging unjust food systems and promoting social justice *and community food security*. Our analysis highlights the connections between micro and meso dimensions of food insecurity by articulating how individual workaround practices fit within the broader context of fragmented food assistance programs as strategies to negotiate or protect one's dignity.

In the next sections, we discuss literatures pertaining to food access and insecurity as well as resistance and workarounds. We then address our methodological approaches including the location of the case study, data collection strategies and our analytical approach. Finally, we present our findings, paying special attention to the ways in which people experiencing food insecurity negotiate dignity and social justice within fragmented community food access spaces.

Literature review

We begin by addressing literature relating to food access, incorporating dimensions of food insecurity, dignity and social justice to articulate complexities in the extant literature. We then turn to a discussion of resistance, rooted in collective behavior and social movement research. We particularly address studies focusing on everyday resistance and associated workarounds to consider the ways people use negotiation and networks in their food access practices under circumstances of food insecurity.

Food access, insecurity, dignity and social justice

Food is a human right (D'Odorico et al., 2019; Herrington and Mix, 2021), yet while current food production systems can sustain the population worldwide, food is unevenly

distributed, placing a disproportionate burden on vulnerable populations. While definitions – and therefore assessments – of food security and insecurity vary (Clapp *et al.*, 2022), *generally speaking*, food insecurity is a condition whereby people have difficulty obtaining and consuming sufficient, satisfactory, culturally appropriate and fresh foods (Chegini *et al.*, 2021; Herrington and Mix, 2021; Janda *et al.*, 2022) and is associated with economic insecurity and negative mental, emotional and physical health outcomes (Ginsburg *et al.*, 2019; Oldewage-Theron *et al.*, 2020; Rizvi *et al.*, 2022).

Food deserts [1], described as "places with no or limited food availability" (Smith and Morton, 2009, p. 176) emphasize the geographic location of food spaces. However, food access issues are multifaceted. Barriers include food quality, variety and options available in stores, prices, opening hours, personal preferences and attitudes toward food, informational barriers, cultural acceptability and systemic racial inequality among others (see Andress and Fitch, 2016; Ball *et al.*, 2009; Janda *et al.*, 2022; Mcdermot *et al.*, 2017; McEntee and Agyeman, 2010; Rodriguez and Grahame, 2016).

Food access varies (Yeager and Gatrell, 2014) with people moving in and out of food insecurity as they experience negative or positive circumstances (Bowen *et al.*, 2022). Literature highlights the ways, opportunities and obstacles through which groups access, select and consume food, illustrating how people navigate complex and unjust food systems and make decisions to mitigate food insecurity and inequality. For instance, Ball and colleagues (2009) illustrate perceived benefits of food selection, where more filling but less *nutritious* foods might be favored over *more nutritious* but less substantial foods. Oldewage-Theron and colleagues (2020, p. 11) identify how older people in Texas cope with food insecurity by consuming "only a few kinds of foods," not eating "preferred foods," and even eating food they "did not really want." Similarly, Fielding-Singh (2021) discusses how food insecure mothers make choices to feed their families while trying to please their children with preferred foods or opting for convenience – even though such foods are often high-calorie, processed items.

Given existing complexities, food access practices are dignity practices which can be embedded in a food justice framework. Dignity work is the conscious process of aiming "to rescue, repair or promote [one's] own dignity, in either affirmative or defensive ways" (Bedore, 2018, p. 219). Expressed at the individual level, dignity is also "a function of social relations" (Herrington and Mix, 2021, p. 5), reflecting the connection between individuals and food systems. Food, foodways and food practices represent more than sustenance; they can promote or hinder feelings of dignity (Kent, 2010; Share, 2019).

In addressing food insecurity (McEntee, 2011), food justice approaches view food systems as unjust "racial projects, political and economic undertakings through which racial hierarchies are established and racialized subjectivities are created" (Omi and Winant, 1994; Alkon and Agyeman, 2011, pp. 4–5) placing race and class as central organizing forces within contemporary food systems. Food insecurity and lack of access are part of a long-lasting and ongoing legacy of racialized oppression and colonization (Freeman, 2020; Norgaard *et al.*, 2011). A food justice perspective calls for a structural transformation of food systems while also emphasizing the importance of micro level actions (Noll and Murdock, 2020; Coulson and Milbourne, 2021).

Food justice promotes food security as "a rights-based framework" (Caruso, 2014) challenging capitalist consumption models by viewing people who navigate food systems not as consumers (McEntee, 2011) but as informed individuals with agency to make food production, distribution and consumption decisions (Alkon and Agyeman, 2011). Researchers note the importance of local community involvement in food democracy (Rose, 2017) as part of communities' "right to determine their own food systems" (Coulson and Milbourne, 2021, p. 45). Clapp and Colleagues (2022) argue that agency, the ability for people to actively participate in the decision-making process in a given system, is an

important pillar of food security. Similarly, in his book about food practices among Black Americans in Jackson, MS, Ewoodzie (2021, p. 261) contends that studying "people's food choices […] displays the resources they have available to them and how they use their resources to solve the quotidian problem of getting something to eat."

The development of community food projects is consistent with an environmental justice framework, encouraging just systems and social justice dimensions (Gottlieb and Fisher, 1996). Embedded in everyday practices, food justice is cooperative in nature (Coulson and Milbourne, 2021). Community food access initiatives play an important role in promoting dignity by reinventing practices (Bedore, 2018) and shaping community food access norms (Smith and Morton, 2009). Rose (2017, p. 234) argues that food hubs promote social justice by "strengthening local food communities and their economies and may provide a strong plank from which to create broader food system change."

While scholars criticize food banks' ability to bring about durable structural change owing to their operation within capitalist modes of production and consumption (Alkon and Agyeman, 2011; Cloke *et al.*, 2017; Bedore, 2018), food assistance spaces may also constitute areas to reclaim dignity as part of supportive food networks that encourage community ties and interactions (Enns *et al.*, 2020). Studies illustrate that dignity, food access and food security operate at micro and meso levels. Community members may play an active role in devising ways to promote empowering food practices, social justice and community food security.

Resistance and workarounds

While some willingly accept community initiatives and/or assistance, others engage in manifest and latent resistance in their interactions with food access spaces. A form of "opposition and mobilization" (Conde and Le Billon, 2017, p. 682), resistance implies confrontational activities to challenge the status quo (Hollander and Einwohner, 2004) and disrupt various systems of control (Cameron and Rahman, 2022). While definitions of resistance vary, central to characterizations are uneven power dynamics between actors (Hollander and Einwohner, 2004; Johansson and Vinthagen, 2016; Conde and Le Billon, 2017). Often a feature of structured collective action and social movement organization, resistance can take many forms, contingent on interactions with the larger social context.

Highlighting the "interactional nature of resistance," and noting a lack of clear definitions for resistance in extant literature, Hollander and Einwohner (2004, p. 548) identify a seven form typology of resistance strategies dependent on key involved stakeholders' definitions of an action. In their classification, the resisting group, their targeted opponents and outside bystanders each play a role in recognizing an event as an act of resistance. While overt resistance, where all parties identify the same event as resistance, reflects widespread understandings of collective action opposition; other, less obvious forms of defiance reflect the complexity in observing and interpreting resistance (Hollander and Einwohner, 2004). Expanding on Hollander and Einwohner's ideas, Johansson and Vinthagen (2016, p. 7) argue that repertoires of everyday resistance represent "a series of relationships and processes of interaction, between agents of resistance (the resisters), between the agents of resistance and the agents of power (the targets), or between the two former types of agents and different observers." Thus, explicit and implicit forms of resistance co-exist beyond obvious contentious actions.

Externally defined resistance highlights the role of observers in understanding resistance (Hollander and Einwohner, 2004). While not dispossessing underserved groups from defining resistance strategies on their own terms, scholars may account for attitudes and behaviors that would otherwise not be understood as resistance, often because they occur at micro or meso levels or in seemingly less contentious settings. Similar to repertoires of everyday resistance that are available whether groups "are part of a social movement or

not" (Johansson and Vinthagen, 2016, p. 5), externally defined resistance connects individual actions to larger structural phenomena that constrain people's agency and encourage adoption of various resistance forms.

Employment of routine opposition strategies has become more visible as researchers take interest in efforts occurring in less confrontational but more widespread spaces. Evans and Moore (2015) consider mundane opposition strategies in their study of emotional labor among people of color in white institutional spaces, and Cameron and Rahman (2022) address both control and resistance in the gig economy. Everyday resistance tactics operate at a different level than direct conflict but provide tools that "require little or no coordination or planning; they often represent a form of individual self-help; and they typically avoid any direct symbolic confrontation with authority or with elite norms" (Scott, 1985, p. 29). For instance, researchers argue that workplace resistance helps to restore self-sufficiency and dignity as workers adopt strategies to deal with constraints, difficult customers and/or expectations (Cameron and Rahman, 2022). Everyday resistance is seen in the literature as an empowering practice (Evans and Moore, 2015).

A particular type of everyday resistance, workarounds, are improvised solutions to systemic constraints. They encompass practices aiming to achieve better, more desirable outcomes (Alter, 2014). In the workplace and beyond, workarounds emerge out of perceived limited opportunities as a way to regain control over an unjust system. Studying how migrant food delivery workers in Italy address unfair algorithms, Iazzolino and Varesio (2023, p. 2) argue that "gaming the system is a form of everyday resistance." Similarly, Raridon and colleagues (2021) show that farmers' workarounds can be understood as first steps in addressing structural inequalities.

Although Ginsburg et al. (2019) contend that workarounds add uncertainty to an already difficult-to-navigate food system, others argue that workarounds provide new opportunities for underserved groups to resist or challenge the status quo. As a tactical choice, workarounds are rooted in "mutual help and solidary" (Iazzolino and Varesio, 2023, p. 13). In the workplace, ease of resistance varies at different stages of the process and "can both enable and weaken platforms' control systems" while providing employees opportunities to remain creative in responding to constraints (Cameron and Rahman, 2022, p. 54).

Less attention has been given to everyday resistance strategies or exploration of workarounds as ways for underserved individuals to maintain or reclaim their dignity in unjust food systems. Food practices can be a form of resistance and activism (Alkon and Norgaard, 2009; Ewoodzie, 2021) highlighting the connections between food security and food sovereignty (Clapp, 2014) through greater control of food production and distribution by marginalized or vulnerable groups. Food resources can be difficult to access in spaces where traditional pathways to food are limited. Expanding on Ginsburg et al. (2019) analysis of food pantries, we find that interactions between community food spaces and users are ongoing, shaping and reshaping how food assistance spaces operate and how people use these spaces. We argue that workarounds are defined in relation to both groups' attitudes and behaviors toward community food spaces and embedded in everyday resistance strategies that shape community food practices. This localized dignity work both relates to community food security and reflects empowering practices. In the next section, we detail our research design and methodology.

Research design

We use semi-structured interviews with stakeholders and recipients in a fragmented system of food assistance programs, consisting of church and community-run pantries and communal dinners, in a rural Oklahoma community. Interviews were conducted prior to implementation of a Food and Resource Center (FRC) designed to promote food justice in the area by centralizing resources. As community-based organizations, FRCs offer

extended days and consistent hours of operation and aim to provide not only fresh, nutritious food, but also helpful practical resources such as financial literacy, cooking and childcare courses for recipients (Regional Food Bank of Oklahoma, 2021). Oklahoma experiences high levels of food insecurity, ranking among the top five states with the highest prevalence of low or very low food security since 2016 (Coleman-Jensen *et al*., 2022). The case study location offers unique characteristics, including rural dimensions of place and a town-gown population offering an opportunity to reflect on important dimensions of community food security.

As seen in Table 1, the case study county experienced levels of food insecurity higher than the average rates in Oklahoma from 2017 to 2020, with an average rate of almost 16% of the population expressing difficulty accessing nutritionally appropriate food. Home to one of the largest universities in the state, the area is also a food desert, posing unique barriers to food access (Herrington and Mix, 2021). Waity (2016) notes that food assistance deserts, areas where food assistance resources, such as food pantries, fall outside the one (urban) or 10-mile (rural) radial zones of population centroids, are more likely to be found in rural areas. Researchers also note that rural communities tend to have better access to food pantries and more developed social networks while potentially facilitating stigmatization of food assistance recipients (Bowen *et al*., 2022). Owing to obstacles including the cost of college education, necessary employment to cover fees, or lack of available financial support, the rates of food insecurity among college students is higher than the general US population (Freudenberg *et al*., 2019).

Encompassing a network of agencies, churches and organizations, food access programs were fragmented, struggling to provide appropriate levels of assistance to meet community needs (Herrington and Mix, 2021). As nonprofit organizations, food banks collect food to be distributed in food assistance places such as food pantries (Waite, 2019). Participants often use the term "food bank" to describe their experiences with community programs – although the term does not accurately represent study location systems. To preserve participants' voices and original tone and intent, we maintain their terminology and present quotes with minimal edits. In our analysis, we use the terms "food access spaces," "food assistance spaces" and "community food spaces" to better reflect available resources.

Participants were recruited through purposeful sampling through key contacts, word of mouth, invitation and recruitment flyers. Respondent involvement consists of one-on-one interviews conducted in-person between May 2016 and May 2018 for a total of 38 interviews. Interviews were a half hour to two hours in duration. Table 2 provides an overview of participant demographics. Interviewees, all over the age of 18, are separated into two groups, reflecting different perspectives and experiences within food access spaces: Group 1 – food assistance program stakeholders (e.g. board members, employees and/or volunteers from food pantries, assistance organizations and programs) representing meso dimensions of community food spaces; and Group 2 – food assistance program participants (e.g. people experiencing food insecurity and/or difficulty accessing sufficient and appropriate food) representing micro dimensions of community food access spaces.

Interviews were digitally recorded, exploring issues pertaining to food practices and foodways, food dignity and food access. Conversations were transcribed clean-verbatim,

Table 1	Overview of food insecurity in Oklahoma and in the case study county (2017–2020)	
Year	*Oklahoma food insecurity rate (%)*	*Case study county food insecurity rate (%)*
2017	15.8	19.5
2018	15.1	15.2
2019	14.7	16.1
2020	13.0	14.9
Source: Data courtesy of Feeding America (2023)		

Table 2	Demographic characteristics of interview participants	
Demographic	*Group 1 participants (n = 20)*	*Group 2 participants (n = 18)*
Sex		
Male	12	7
Female	8	11
Race/Ethnicity		
White	20	11
Black	–	3
Native American	–	1
Hispanic	–	2
N/A	–	1
Age		
25–35	1	4
36–45	3	3
46–55	6	6
56–65	3	2
66–75	5	1
76–85	1	1
N/A	1	1
Education		
Less than high school	–	1
High school diploma	3	6
Some college	3	7
Bachelor's degree	6	2
Graduate degree	10	1
N/A	–	1
Income level		
Less than $15,000	–	10
$15,000–$29,999	1	6
$30,000–44,999	–	2
$45,000–59,999	2	–
$60,000–$74,999	–	–
$75,000–$89,999	3	–
$90,000–$100,000	3	–
More than $100,000	10	–
N/A	1	–
Source: Created by authors		

and content was qualitatively analyzed using NVivo. A qualitative content analysis strategy is an accepted method of analyzing interview-based research, as it provides a systematic and flexible approach to data analysis (Schreier, 2012). Codes used in the analysis were part data-driven and part concept-driven, reflecting primary data patterns.

Content coded under the core category of "Dignity" were re-coded to identify specific workaround strategies and ways in which people exercise dignity and social justice in food access spaces. During the line-by-line coding process, units of analysis were defined as "meaningful, undivided" segments (Chenail, 2012, p. 268) to maintain the integrity of participants' experiences. Respondents offer nuanced assessments of their experiences with food assistance spaces in Oklahoma. Quotes reflect common shared experiences among participants.

"You have to give up a lot of pride [. . .]": experiences in a fragmented community food access system

Community food access spaces are shared by stakeholders who operate them and recipients who seek food assistance. Groups represent different yet interconnected experiences. Food assistance spaces are required to follow specific guidelines at the meso

or institutional level related to food distribution. At the micro level, food access participants engage in particular strategies to maintain agency in food acquisition to meet their needs, often overcoming obstacles to use what is considered by many to be a readily available food option. What are community members' experiences in a fragmented food assistance system?

Gaining access to community food resources in a fragmented system is time-consuming. Operating days and hours are limited, lines are long and food choice is minimal especially toward the end of the day. Consistent among food assistance recipients is frustration with a cumbersome process. One recipient explains, "It's an all-day affair. A two-hour trip takes all day [. . .]" while another notes, "it's exhausting, you get up at *eight o'clock*, get there by *nine*, and then you can't leave 'til after noon or one."

At the meso level, precise rules guarantee the working order of food access spaces, with resources generally available through a series of requirements including proof of residency and an ID, generally considered "low-barrier" by stakeholders. Recipients are more nuanced in their assessments of these requirements. Most food access spaces also restrict the number of times recipients can visit within a certain time period – usually once a month or once every three months. Programs make efforts to prevent people from "double-dipping" or overuse. In our study location, churches and organizations worked together to launch initiatives such as Charity Tracker, a database to track how and when people use community food spaces. One manager describes the purpose of Charity Tracker:

> Charity Tracker [. . .] helps address this problem that was expressed by the pastors primarily of those who are in need jumping from one church to the next, to the next, to the next, asking for the same help over, and over, and over. [. . .] We call them the frequent flyer model, which abuses the system.

The above statement illustrates reliance on surveillance to control use and mis-use of resources at the meso level.

At the micro level other organizations plan for accessibility and flexibility whereby food assistance stakeholders navigate the rules of the system to enhance food delivery. This is especially prevalent among people who interact directly and form relationships with recipients. Employees and volunteers often do their best to accommodate people's needs:

> Even though our guidelines say every three months, we really work one-on-one with some of the families. They're just like us. Things happen. Holidays fall in there, family shows up that you weren't expecting. So, we really have a good one-on-one relationship with a lot of them.

A disconnect exists between the social control strategies implemented by organizations' rules and guidelines, and volunteers' and employees' desire to improve food access experiences. When asked about people's perception of food access programs in the area, one food assistance employee addresses a commonly asked question, "'How do you know someone's not taking advantage of you?' Well I have to tell you, there's not a lot at stake in that grocery bag, so there's not a great lot of advantage." Deterrents to system misuse, restrictions highlight both the stigmatized and supplemental nature of community food sites that provide "a five to seven-day supply of food" that sometimes "doesn't even last maybe one or two days" as one recipient states. Temporary *and emergency* food assistance spaces have limited resources, yet recipients regularly rely on such places. Similar to Poppendieck (1998), Bowen and colleagues (2022) and Yeager and Gatrell (2014), we find that use of community food spaces is not uniform among food assistance recipients with regular, periodic or intermittent use reported throughout interviews. However, the assessment that food access spaces address a persistent structural need is consistent in our conversations.

While experiences vary, food assistance program stakeholders and recipients alike agree that food insecurity is a largely invisible – and misunderstood – issue in the community.

Respondents from both groups regularly explain the lack of awareness regarding obstacles to food access. One volunteer stakeholder indicates:

> One out of five people is food insecure in [our town], and that just doesn't fit my image of [our town], right? […] We've got all these jobs that the university provides. We've got several big industries in town that provide jobs. So, how could it really be a problem? […] If you're not looking for it, you won't see a problem.

Food assistance stakeholders regularly emphasize benefits provided by food pantries. For them, food access programs are instrumental in promoting positive outcomes. Apparent in the interviews is the desire of food access site employees and volunteers to smooth the way for people seeking resources.

Meanwhile, food assistance recipients and their families maintain a nuanced assessment of programs, indicating a shared understanding of the social cost of food assistance in the community, which is also reflected in participants' experiences with government programs, including SNAP. Despite overall positive interactions with food pantry and community dinner employees and volunteers – interviewees explain that they are well-treated – recipients are aware of the stigma associated with using food assistance programs. Some food access stakeholders note that people take advantage of the system, do not know how to spend their money or cannot budget effectively, all widespread stereotypes associated with an individualized approach to poverty. Food assistance recipients often describe the humbling experience of accessing community food spaces. One recipient discusses the invisible mental toll, "The financial price is okay. The emotional and social price you pay is a lot more. […] You have to give a lot of pride up to go to a food bank. The stigma attached to going to a food bank is pretty great."

Food assistance recipients are adamant about challenging negative assessments pertaining to food assistance programs. They note that one cannot judge community food program guests because, "Everybody has their own story. Everybody has things that have happened to them." Understanding that various circumstances lead people to visit stigmatized food spaces challenges preconceived ideas about who uses assistance and why. Noting both structural factors and stigma, one recipient discusses the public's perception of food access spaces:

> I don't think they believe that people that have jobs go to food banks. But, they do. […] It's not just people that, you know, live off the government, or are looking for a handout and don't want to take care of themselves. A lot of people go because they can't make ends meet with what they make.

The above statements illustrate the ways food systems "reflect, and even create, social and economic hierarchies" (Alkon and Agyeman, 2011, p. 11). Stakeholders and recipients alike provide assessments of fragmented food access spaces whereby constraints to prevent system abuse and promote system sustainability do not always match. Data reflect the ways in which communities are instrumental in shaping food access while illustrating the discrepancy between the *ad hoc* nature of fragmented food access spaces and individuals potential long-term reliance on food assistance (Enns *et al.*, 2020; Bowen *et al.*, 2022). Food access programs are shaped and reshaped by the on-going interactions of stakeholders and recipients, representing respectively meso and micro level dimensions.

"I had to break their rule […] we didn't have enough money to make it!": everyday resistance, workarounds, dignity and social justice

Food practices and foodways can shape "individuals' sense of identity or self-concept" (Herrington and Mix, 2021, p. 18). In particular, less visible food access programs, such as those in a fragmented system, offer spaces to engage in everyday forms of resistance and associated workarounds at the micro level to create new opportunities for dignity and social justice. Stakeholders and recipients alike engage in distancing work (Bedore, 2018),

especially community food space guests who practice resilience in making the most of limited choices (Ball *et al.*, 2009; Oldewage-Theron *et al.*, 2020). In what ways do individuals use everyday resistance and workarounds to actively promote experiences of dignity and social justice in food access spaces?

Workarounds are deployed by recipients as part of broader strategic choices aimed at maximizing food opportunities. People experiencing food insecurity often face tough budget choices. One recipient prioritizes expenses, "Either you get toiletries, or you get food. You pick." Another states:

> I either pay this bill this month, or I get food for my family. If I don't pay my rent, then I don't have a job, then I don't have a house to live in, then we're not going to have any food anyway. So, I pay bills. What's left, we try to buy food. And, if we don't, then I'm like, okay, let's find some churches.

Workarounds are not passive. They are part of a repertoire of alternative practices addressing gaps in a support network that illustrates how people make systems work for them despite limitations. In particular, the one-food-assistance-space and once-in-a-month limits are often bypassed by recipients. Recipients develop strategies to access food despite perceived restrictive rules, "I had to break their rule, on not being able to go to multiple food pantries, because we didn't have enough money to make it! I went to three or four food pantries within that month. If they ever had caught me, I wouldn't be able to pick up from them anymore."

When discussing experiences in community food spaces, another recipient shares a comparable viewpoint regarding food rule breaking or bending:

> I'm not going to let my kids starve to death. So, if I have to go steal food, I'll steal food. I take that risk of getting caught. […] Do I pay to have a house? Or do I pay to have food in my house for the next whatever days until I get an eviction notice? […] You're going to pay to have a roof over your head. Everybody would, you know.

These accounts highlight "micro-resistances" (Coulson and Milbourne, 2021, p. 46). Alter notes that, "Workarounds are fundamentally about human agency, the ability of people to make choices related to acting in the world" (2014, p. 1048).

Actions at the micro level also fit within the broader community context. While not concerted efforts to challenge food insecurity, workarounds are widespread individual solutions embedded in day-to-day practices. We argue that these workarounds are examples of externally defined forms of resistance (Hollander and Einwohner, 2004) to bypass structural limitations. Defined by Ginsburg *et al.* (2019, p. 23) as "improvisations in food provision," workarounds promote greater control and are deployed as creative solutions to maximize food access. For instance, unwanted food is often exchanged outside of food pantries. One food assistance recipient explains:

> If you go to the food bank, and they give you an item that you definitely won't use, you feel very compelled to use it because they get kind of angry at you because they're giving you something and you're refusing it. […] If you go out to the parking lots of a food bank, then watch people going and coming out, it's a swap meet.

Another recipient who is a vegetarian notes, "I trade. I give something I don't want. For instance, I trade a lot of items for dried fruit or dates, or something like that." Being able to engage in negotiation and exchange with both food assistance employees and volunteers, as well as others using food assistance programs improves one's sense of agency and dignity. These exchanges lead to practices that reinforce social networks and community ties as described here:

> We see each other every time we go! […] There's a community involved in people that use the food banks. Once you get over the shame of having to go to a food bank, and you know all those people are in the exact same situation, then you talk and find out, and you ask questions. […]

> A lot of people are like me. You'll see little groups swapping out in the parking lot. Wait about five minutes after it closes and go see the swap shop.

Food assistance users' ability to navigate their food preferences and dietary restrictions illustrates how people use workarounds to promote experiences of dignity. Recipients with food restrictions indicate that it is not always easy to find appropriate options, whereas others share anecdotes about accepting food that they do not like.

Health, nutrition and variety remain important dimensions. Community food recipients are conscious about nutritious eating, both acknowledging and regretting limited nutritious food options and challenging preconceived ideas about individuals who are food insecure. One recipient states, "I just can't afford to eat healthier, or have my kids eat healthier. [...] If I went the healthy route, we wouldn't make it two weeks." Another rues her current diet, "I don't eat healthy. I try to, but I don't. It's just not in my life right now." Other recipients echo these experiences while emphasizing the importance of nutritious food. One notes, "you're not getting foods that you need, that are healthy. It's still boxed foods, and canned, and what have you [...]" Another recipient agrees, "I'm a very health-conscious guy, so when I go to the food bank, you know, beggars can't be choosers, but it wouldn't hurt to get some healthy stuff." While relying on processed and non-nutritious food is humbling, it also reflects a "we've got to do what we've got to do" attitude prevalent among those who seek food assistance. Nutritious food is not always available in a fragmented food access system.

Community food spaces also strengthen engagement through the desire to volunteer, another way dignity and social justice may be promoted, particularly in fragmented systems. Volunteering is a source of pride and a way to improve the community by responding to food needs. Food assistance recipients explain that given the time and opportunity they do, or would like to, volunteer to serve their community to show that they are not a burden. One recipient shares their interest in volunteering, "I like being a part of helping people. Also, to let them know I'm not just taking all the time. You know, a way of giving back." Volunteering may enhance recipients' positive sense of self, "I just feel like I can give, too, not just to go get something free all the time." Reinforcing community ties, contribution operates in a positive way (Jacobson, 2012; Bedore, 2018) by providing opportunities to address local needs and enhance recipient dignity. For community food space stakeholders providing food assistance, often without pay, represents a type of dignity work benefiting others (Bedore, 2018).

Cognizant of the stigma of food assistance programs, food assistance recipients have internalized negative stereotypes, sharing stories about and distancing themselves from those they see as taking advantage of the system. Distancing works in a defensive way (Bedore, 2018) drawing a line between those seen as deserving and less deserving. One recipient explains:

> I'm here because I have to be, I don't want to be, trust me. A lot of the people that you see go in there, [...] they've got food stamps. And they sold them all to pay for whatever reason. [...] You can see the type of people that gets them and sells them, versus the people who don't get them at all.

Drawing clear boundaries to manage stigma and articulate fair versus unfair use is one strategy to rationalize and justify, especially to outsiders, use of community food spaces.

Our analysis reflects the use of workarounds as forms of everyday resistance strategies that address "issues of fairness and power in the food system" (Caruso, 2014). Everyday resistance and workarounds operate at the individual level but reflect – and challenge – larger expectations in the social system. Instead of passively depending on – usually insufficient – social security nets, recipients actively navigate a constrained system to maintain their dignity and enhance social justice. Individuals engage in dignity work to

maximize positive food outcomes within food access spaces via dignity intervention (Bedore, 2018) intended to enhance the self-esteem of others while highlighting broader goals for the community, namely, mitigating food insecurity in the study location. However limited they might be, these solutions fit everyday social justice practices that are "messy, ongoing, quotidian ways" to change unfair systems (Coulson and Milbourne, 2021, p. 46).

Conclusions

We illustrate the co-construction of dignity and social justice in the ways people navigate fragmented food access spaces through everyday resistance and workarounds. Food access is an important dimension of community resilience and a component of social justice whereby people play an active role in deciding what foods to consume and how to consume them. Food access and food security are multifaceted (Ball *et al.*, 2009; Andress and Fitch, 2016; Mcdermot *et al.*, 2017) and resistance takes many forms (Hollander and Einwohner, 2004) reflecting the ways in which vulnerable populations deploy strategies to overcome obstacles in unjust food systems. Strategies are rooted in day-to-day lives, via both constraints and opportunities (Evans and Moore, 2015; Cameron and Rahman, 2022; Iazzolino and Varesio, 2023).

Our interviews highlight how people make sense of rules and find solutions to meet their food needs in a fragmented system. Rule breaking and bending, food exchanges and alternative food practices are common among food assistance recipients, despite existing operating rules and control mechanisms. Although limited in their strategic choices, recipients are able to maintain agency and dignity in food access by engaging in alternative and creative solutions. Workarounds function as everyday externally-defined resistance strategies (Hollander and Einwohner, 2004) embedded in routine practices. While food assistance recipients face stigma and community food spaces offer limited solutions to structured food insecurity, workarounds represent more than mere spontaneous reactions to limited opportunities. Instead, strategies like food exchanges and planned use of multiple food access sites reflect conscious decisions about how to best maximize local food assistance networks and resources despite potential negative consequences. These strategies reflect the importance of agency in food security (Clapp *et al.*, 2022). Although individual in nature, workarounds are embedded within the broader community and unfold as people interact with one another. On-going relations can lead to community-based solutions aimed at simplifying the system and empowering recipients, ultimately offering solutions to better address community needs and promote social justice.

Despite limitations in generalizability that may maintain due to study location characteristics – a relatively small rural college town, the small number of Group 1 stakeholders, and the small number and self-identified nature of Group 2 recipients – we provide useful insight into the ways individuals navigate food assistance programs, addressing Ginsburg *et al.* (2019) concerns about the different ways groups experience food pantries and food banks. We also identify how people construct and maintain dignity within unjust food systems. Future research may address the ways in which a centralized food resource center represents a pivotal moment in addressing community food needs and promoting agency. Research should further explore dimensions of food sovereignty within both fragmented and centralized food access spaces and continue to consider the roles that charity and emergency food sites play within broader food system structures. Additionally, researchers can explore the role of emotions in shaping food assistance recipient experiences both before and after the implementation of food resource hubs with intent to centralize food assistance resources.

Our work has important implications. By highlighting how people work around inefficient food systems, we call for necessary changes in the way food assistance programs operate at the meso level – through community initiatives like FRCs designed to promote better food access and choice – but also more broadly. Greater attention should be given to policies that enhance and promote improved access to government benefits (SNAP, WIC, welfare

benefits, housing help, social security, etc.) and protect vulnerable populations (minimum wage increase, eviction protection, rent control, among others). We agree with Ewoodzie (2021, p. 264) that "any successful food policy also has to be an anti-poverty policy."

Additionally, our findings illustrate the importance of community food security as a way to situate community-informed dignity work within the broader scope of food activism and movements with ties to food justice and food sovereignty (see among others Alkon and Norgaard, 2009; Alkon and Agyeman, 2011; Holt-Giménez and Wang, 2011; Clapp, 2014). Current food assistance programs, both emergency and otherwise, fail to promote long-term empowering food security. Workarounds are limited and do not openly challenge the system. Patterns and practices of resistance are important in promoting a dignified approach to local food access. Structural changes dismantling oppression and exploitation within food systems remain critical to promoting sustainable change. Such changes must apply to and be informed by local food practices. It is through such efforts that safer – and more just – communities are possible.

Note

1. Recently, scholars have been using the concept of food apartheid to highlight the racialized and systemic component of food access inequality (see for instance Joyner et al., 2022).

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