What does food mean? A multi-scale investigation into Des Moines, Iowa

by

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The student author, whose presentation of the scholarship herein was approved by the program of study committee, is solely responsible for the content of this thesis. The Graduate College will ensure this thesis is globally accessible and will not permit alterations after a degree is conferred.

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Food plays an integral role in not only our health, but also our identity, culture, personal relationships, and the place in which we live. Using a food justice framework, this study investigates what food means to the organizations participating in the Des Moines food system, to a community-based organization located in a racially diverse, low-income neighborhood, and to six high school youth living in that neighborhood. Using a survey, interviews, and photovoice, this Participatory Action Research (PAR) study finds that the meaning of food changes with scale. In the food system network, food is a commodity. For the community-based organization, food is a form of community development. For the youth, food is part of their lived experience that reflects health, care, and identity. I argue that incorporating the various scales and meanings of food in policy implementation and planning ensures healthy, affordable, culturally appropriate food for all while supporting environmentally responsible agriculture and the empowerment of local producers and consumers.
CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

“Food can be a powerful metaphor for the way we organize and relate to society. Beyond subsistence, food is a social and cultural expression of individuals. It acts as an entry point into larger debates and discourse around a multitude of issues. Through food we can better understand our histories, our cultures, and our shared future. Food connects us to ecological systems and can teach us about the world in which we live.” Levkoe, 2006, p. 89.

Food has deeper meaning than the energy it provides. It is intimately connected to personal identity, relationships, and place. It can be viewed as a representation of culture; a commodity on the global market; a source of energy; a point of pride; and an act of care. Food has different meanings on different scales from global to community to individual. These scales are interrelated, with the individual nested within the community, the community nested within local, national, and global networks. The production and consumption of food and the market that drives these actions tie food to the systems that govern us. Food also has meaning in place; people in particular regions often share a food culture, eating similar items and enjoying similar tastes. Families coalesce around food, making it a centerpiece for relationship development and growth. On an individual level, food provides the energy a person needs to sustain life. Despite the important economic, cultural, social, and physical importance of food in our lives, planners know very little about the meaning of food in the lived experiences and interconnected communities in which we plan.
We understand how and why food is produced and consumed; it is necessary to sustain life. In order to address issues in food, we need to understand food on different scales. Food has different meaning at the individual, community, and food system network levels. Learning what food means on these various levels will allow for a better food system and its integration into planning. Policies and programs of change must be based on the lived experiences of individuals in a given place in order to be successful. We must understand the meaning of food in the network to know how to implement improvements. Without understanding the meaning of food, we cannot address the root of the issue, only treat the symptoms.

This paper addresses the meaning of food in Des Moines, Iowa, on the individual, community, and network levels. The first section of this paper explains problems in the food system and the frameworks that have been used to approach them. Next, it presents the methods used in this research to examine food on three scales. Finally, this paper presents and discusses the results of the research. These findings provide key insights to planners and decision-makers to guide food programs and food policies that improve the food system of the city, especially for those who have had limited access to food.

**Background of Study**

Millions of people across the United States lack access to food, and many more have limited access to food with adequate nutritional value. Problems with access to healthy and affordable food disproportionately affect people of color, urban areas, households with children, and low-income households (Alkon & Agyeman, 2011). This research utilizes a critical race framework that “foregrounds race and racism in all aspects of the research process” and recognizes the intersection of race, class, and gender in societal investigations.
The data on food security reflects the greater food security burden felt by people of color. Thirteen percent of households in America experience food insecurity and this burden falls heavily on households of color. “While 10% of white households experience hunger, households of color experience hunger at rates of up to 21.5%” (USDA ERS, 2017). Among vulnerable groups such as veterans or the elderly, people of color are still worse off than their white counterparts. People of color who are also veterans are “twice as likely as all veterans to live below the poverty line” and people of color with disabilities “are three times as likely to face poverty as other disabled adults” (Gamblin & Nitschke, 2017). Senior citizens of color are also more likely to live in poverty.

Racial discrimination creates inequities in access to food. While additional vulnerabilities are important to consider, race has a notable impact on access to food. “Only 8% of African Americans have a grocery store in their census tract” (Treuhaft & Karpyn, 2010) and with lower economic prosperity, people of color are less likely to own cars, making trips to the grocery store even more difficult. Food stores in communities of color also often lack healthy food options, providing only processed foods or low quality products (Abdul-Samad, 2019; Figuroa & Alkon, 2017).

This paper delves into the meaning of food on multiple scales in order to best address issues in the food system. Pinstrup-Andersen and Watson (2011) define the food system as, “the aggregate of food-related activities and the environments (political, socioeconomic, and natural) within which these activities occur” (p. 4). This means the food system is intimately tied to broad social systems. Communities of color are disproportionately affected by food access problems. Food assistance organizations such as food pantries, food banks, and meal services attempt to fulfill the food needs for those who lack the means to buy food. In order
to understand how successful these organizations are, it is necessary to understand how they work together and how they view food and the food system. Understanding the meaning of food at this level allows planners and decision makers to take action to ensure food access for all populations. It is important to understand the network of food organizations because it illustrates the landscape of the food system of a place by making clear the strong and weak ties between food organizations (Granovetter, 1973). Networks (informal as well as formal) explain the flow of information and what organizations have most influence (Cross, Borgatti, & Parker, 2017).

Additionally, this study seeks to understand the meaning of food for individuals living in low-income communities and communities of color. Urban youth provide a unique perspective when it comes to the meaning of food. Any changes to food programs should be place-based and people oriented, necessitating the inclusion of lived experience in policy and program considerations. This paper seeks to answer the question “what does food mean?” at the network, community development organization, and individual level to better understand how to incorporate food into planning, implement improvements, and provide food for all.

**Right to Food**

This paper builds from the idea that people have a right to food regardless of their socioeconomic status. People have a right to survive and a right to food, yet people around the world go hungry. “The right to food has been recognized as a human right since the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948” according to the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) of the United Nations (2007, p. 2). The human right to food has been incorporated in binding and non-binding documents and guidelines for implementation have been sculpted by the FAO. These guidelines have been implemented in communities across
the globe that combat hunger and food insecurity with a rights-based approach. They acknowledge the positive and negative impacts food aid programs have had on the recipients of aid and call for more nuanced, holistic, and people-oriented solutions to food insecurity. The right to food framework recognizes economic systems and the importance of people’s autonomy.

Referencing one of President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s four freedoms – the freedom from want – Chilton and Rose (2009) explain that this human rights framework stems from the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, a United Nations document from 1948.

“Adopting key elements of the human rights framework is the obvious next step in improving human nutrition and well-being” (p. 1203). Few people would argue that other should be hungry. A framework that embodies the right to food promotes government accountability, increases public participation, addresses vulnerability and discrimination, and links policies to outcomes (Chilton & Rose, 2009). The right to food, put simply, is “the right to expect reasonable opportunities to provide food and good nutrition for oneself” and should be able to rely on the government to fulfill food needs when this is not possible (Chilton & Rose, 2009, p. 1207). Recognizing the right to food, this thesis uses a food justice framework to examine the food system Des Moines, Iowa.

**Conventional Food System**

The conventional food system, which sees food as merely a commodity to buy and sell, is embedded within the global neoliberal system. According to Brenner and Theodore (2002), neoliberal ideology involves “the belief that open, competitive, and unregulated markets, liberated from all forms of state interference, represent the optimal mechanism for economic development” (p. 350). This ideology “asserts the primacy of the market in
attending to human needs and wellbeing” focusing on the health of the market (Alkon & Mares, 2012, p. 348). It embodies the idea that the free market will address societal problems and the state, or government intervention, only hinders it. Neoliberalism, then, calls for deregulation of state control, removal of welfare programs, and increased autonomy and power for corporations (Brenner & Theodore, 2002, p. 350).

The neoliberal presence in the food system has reinforced inequity by: consolidating power in the food supply and production system; privatizing “functions once held by the state”; and shifting perceived responsibility for wellbeing from the collective to the individual (Alkon & Mares, 2012, p. 349). Agriculture companies have merged and created near monopolies on products such as seed and pesticides and very few processing companies dominate the meat, dairy and egg processing landscape (Howard, 2009). Small companies and farmers are left without the benefits or opportunities they may have once had due to price control and a slimming market for new business. Non-profit food banks now bear the brunt of feeding hungry populations, contrary to the bread lines and government assistance seen during the Great Depression. A lack of access to healthy food is viewed as the fault of the individual; the poor, the marginalized are viewed as responsible for their lack of access to vital resources. Neoliberalism embodies the idea of individual responsibility and rejects the responsibility people have to care for one another. The neoliberal ideology is in direct contrast with the right to food ideology.

A food justice framework confronts this neoliberal hegemony in favor of a more just equitable food system. Centering justice and equity in the food system positions the system within the right to food framework. However, the neoliberal system is ingrained in social, economic, and political systems across the globe. Transformation in the food system can
happen simultaneously within and outside of the neoliberal system; many tools can be utilized to confront the neoliberal system which has resulted in inequity, food insecurity and injustice. These tools can address issues in production, distribution, and consumption. Programs that help small scale farmers, community based agriculture, local food systems, and include measures to address equity and large systemic injustices can transform the food system and shrink the number of food insecure people and households. Bringing equity and justice to the center of the food system can create sustainable change that improves lives and livelihoods.

Research Questions

This study asks what food means on three different scales in Des Moines, Iowa. To understand what food means in Des Moines, I investigated food at the network, organization, and individual level. My research questions are:

1. How is the network of food organizations structured in Des Moines?
2. What role does Creative Visions, a non-profit organization in a low-income community, play in the food network of Des Moines?
3. What experiences do youth residents of the low-income community have with food?

These questions guide this qualitative work and provide for analysis that include the lived experiences of individuals and the context of the city. The world is shaped by those who interpret it, so understanding the interpretation provides a clearer understanding of food (Seamon, 2013). Planners, policy makers and decision makers can use such information to better shape transformative policies for citizens.
Summary and Thesis Outline

This research uses participatory action and network analysis methodologies to critically engage with the food system of Des Moines, Iowa. The following chapters provide my justification, context, related literature review and analysis of this complex topic and its importance on each scale.

Chapter 2 provides concepts and information about food access and food security in the United States. More specifically, it examines the inequity within the food system based on race and socioeconomic status. It explores hunger and inequity in Des Moines, Iowa, where racial divides are still prevalent – spatially, economically, and socially. This chapter introduces important data that justifies a multi-scale investigation into the food system.

Chapter 3 explores literature related to food systems. It outlines the conventional food system and its problems as well as alternative food systems that have risen over the years. It presents the theoretical framework of food justice I use during my research and critique of the Des Moines food system.
Chapter 4 presents the methods used in this study and the justification for them. A survey was sent to food organizations in Des Moines to complete a network analysis which identified connections among organizations and the prevalence of food services in the city. Interviews were conducted with staff members of a community development oriented non-profit, Creative Visions. A Participatory Action Research (PAR) methodology, photovoice, was employed to understand the lived experiences of youth in a low-income neighborhood.

Chapters 5, 6 and 7 explain the results of the network analysis, interviews with Creative Visions staff members, and photovoice. Using literature and qualitative analysis, these chapters each explore the meaning of food on each scale.

Chapter 8 offers a discussion of the findings, how the meaning of food on the three scales examined in this paper differ, and how they can be considered in planning and food organizations. This study allows for food justice to continue to be pursued in Des Moines and at Creative Visions while considering lived experience and wider social contexts.
CHAPTER 2. PROBLEMS IN THE FOOD SYSTEM

Food Security Concepts and Data

Though the United States is considered to be one of the wealthiest, most developed countries in the world, still 11.8% of its citizens, or 40 million people, experienced food insecurity in 2017 (USDA ERS, 2018). The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) provides definitions of food security and data associated with food security. The USDA defines food insecurity as “limited or uncertain access to food” (USDA ERS, 2018). This is different than hunger, however, which is an individual condition that may result from food insecurity. The USDA defines two levels of food insecurity; low food security (or food insecurity without hunger) is characterized by (1) poor quality, nutrition, and/or desirability of the diet and (2) maintained access to some type of food; very low food security (or food insecurity with hunger) is characterized by missing meals, a reduction in food intake, and simply not enough food. Out of the households that are considered to have very low food security, over 95% reported they had to worry about food and money running out; food does not stay fresh long enough; balanced meals are unaffordable; and adults have had to cut the size of or skip meals to feed their families.

Food insecurity rates are higher among single mother households, households of color, and the poor (USDA ERS, 2018). In 2017, 7.3% of food insecure households were considered to have low insecurity while 4.5% were characterized by very low food security (USDA ERS, 2018). While hunger is very serious, individuals and households that experience any level of food insecurity are vulnerable to health issues that follow them from infancy to old age. Aside from the physical health issues (obesity, diabetes, and other diet-related diseases), experiencing food insecurity leads to serious psychological stress in
children and adults (Becerra, Sis-Medina, Reyes & Becerra, 2015; McLaughlin, Green, Alegria, Costello, Gruber, Sampson & Kessler, 2012; Nitschke, 2017). Serious psychological stress can lead to engagement in risky behaviors, anxiety and depression, and behavior disorders that affect how an individual interacts with the world (McLaughlin et al., 2017), having negative effects far beyond food consumption. Food insecurity disproportionately affects households with children and people of color. Of the 40 million people in food-insecure households, 6.5 million are children who experience food insecurity and 540,000 are children who experience very low food security. Single-parent homes (specifically, single-mother homes) experience the highest rates of food insecurity – 30.3% (USDA ERS, 2018). Food insecurity affects vulnerable populations the most.

Race and ethnicity are correlated with food insecurity in the United States. Compared to the national average of 11.8% households experiencing food insecurity, 21.8% of black, non-Hispanic households experience food insecurity and 18% of Latinx households experience food insecurity (USDA ERS, 2018). High prevalence of food insecurity among people of color is tied to societal inequities. The Alliance to End Hunger, a national advocacy non-profit, draws connections between hunger and race as well as hunger and school, work, housing, and spatial access to food (Nitschke, 2017). Schools with a majority black and/or Latinx population often have fewer resources, thus are less able to provide healthy, high quality food for their students. Lower wages result in less capital to use on food and other important resources including utilities, housing, and medical services. In work and careers, there is still a substantial pay gap between white men and black or Latinx men and women. For every $1 a white man earns, a black man will earn, on average, $0.73; slightly lower than
what a white woman will earn ($0.80) (Nitschke, 2017). Economic stability is often necessary for food security and housing security (King, 2016).

Food insecure individuals, families and households also experience housing instability at an increased rate (King, 2016). These same households often have less social support than those that are food secure and are more likely to experience material hardship; for example, a low-income household that experiences food insecurity may have to choose between eating and paying an electric bill. “Food insecurity could have an association with housing instability through the depletion or unavailability of resources” (King, 2016, p. 3).

Finally, spatial access to food is disparate based on race. Food deserts, or neighborhoods with low to no access to healthful fruits, vegetables, and proteins but likely high access to convenience stores that lack foods with such nutrition, are “primarily inhabited by African Americans and recent immigrants” (ACLU & New York Law School, 2012; Guthman, 2018, p. 149). Overall, African Americans are less likely to have access to a grocery store and less likely to have adequate resources with which to buy the foods in them. The foods that are available are often more expensive as well (Donahue & Mitchell, 2018).

Urban communities that experience food insecurity tend to be characterized by a low-income, high minority-race population (Alkon & Agyeman, 2011). Alternative food movements confront the systemic problems in the food system in various degrees. True food justice requires complete food security and food sovereignty, or reclamation of “rights and participation in the food system” and challenging corporate food regimes that uphold inequitable distribution (Clendenning, Dressler & Richards, 2016, p. 165). Food justice, Clendenning, Dressler and Richards argue, embodies a wider lens that includes the socio-historical contexts including race and class issues. Food justice is necessary to change the
deficient food system and produce not only healthy food options but also opportunities to prosper and improve livelihoods for those who have been marginalized.

**Des Moines**

Des Moines is the capital city of Iowa and one of the most diverse cities in the state. Surrounded by large fields of corn and soy for animal feed and biofuel, Des Moines is located on some of the most agriculturally productive land in the world. The city contains a multitude of cultures and neighborhoods. These neighborhoods reflect spatial inequity across the city. Different regions maintain different levels of affluence and resources. Like many neighborhoods across the country, neighborhoods in Des Moines experience food insecurity, low wages, crime and injustices, each of which are perpetuated in numerous ways. Despite being touted as one of the best cities in the U.S., gaining fame for its “reenergized arts venues and a ‘growing’ food scene” (John, 2019), its ranking on “best of” lists for millennials, teachers, young adults, tech workers, successful aging, well-being, cost of living, and overall place to live (DSMPartnership, 2019), people of color are largely excluded from these seemingly impressive traits (One Economy, 2017).

Des Moines is an urban landscape with a population of about 212,000 and a metro-wide population of about 500,000. Though Polk County, in which Des Moines is located, boasts fertile, healthy soils and an agricultural focus, problems of hunger and food security exist in the city. According to Hunger Free Polk County, “there are 72,379 people in Polk County who are food insecure but not experiencing immediate hunger” and 26,690 individuals who experience hunger every day. Racial inequity is prevalent in Polk County with black households characterized by a much lower median income ($26,725) than the general population of the county ($59,844) and high unemployment rates for African
Americans (14.8 % compared to 3.9 percent county-wide) (One Economy, 2017, p. 12.21).

“On nearly every measure, Black Polk County falls short of the wider community” (McGowan, 2017). Neighborhoods of color within the city lack the same resources other neighborhoods enjoy such as grocery stores, infrastructure and adequate housing (One Economy, 2017).

Figure 2-1. Des Moines Income Levels

The State Public Policy Group, a Des Moines organization that investigates public policy and health, community development, and youth among other topics, released a report entitled One Economy: The State of Black Polk County. This report quantifies the yawning gap between black and white individuals’ experiences in Des Moines. Additionally, this report recognizes the importance of lived experiences and attempts to gain a clearer picture of the true state of the city. Framing Des Moines as a “tale of two cities,” the report draws attention to “significant racial disparities in the traditional economic and financial indicators including banking, savings, employment, and housing” (p. 4). Des Moines is home to the
largest black population in Iowa, with about 30 percent of Iowa’s black population living in Polk County and 11 percent within Des Moines. Finally, a disproportionate amount of blacks are living at or below the poverty line in Polk County compared to whites: 39.4 percent versus 9.8 percent (One Economy, 2017, p. 12). The difference between the experiences of Black individuals in Polk County and others is astounding.

The One Economy report cites numerous additional statistics exemplifying the oppression and racial disparity that exists in Des Moines and Polk County. Interviews conducted by the group also reveal an underlying frustration from the black community of Des Moines. They feel the lack of opportunity and recognition. Their lived experiences reflect these dismal statistics:

“When you ask us how we feel, that’s a dumb question. We’re mad! We have our first Black president, but no matter how high we go, we’re still considered not good enough. As a people, we are raised to give grace under fire. We thank the Lord for our jobs, but we’re not making as much as we could. We are going to try to keep going even though they’re keeping us down.” (p. 14).

Many feel that those in power – the corporate community, lawmakers, etc. – have an “out of sight, out of mind” mentality about the state of Black Polk County (Journal Sentinel, 2017). Des Moines may be a land of prosperity for some, but it is imperative it is made prosperous for all residents. It is clear this city is not free of the systemic, hegemonic
hierarchies that exist elsewhere that continue to unduly burden some members of society based on race. Des Moines, like other cities in the US, cannot claim to be a racially just city. Systemic inequities people of color experience affect the ability to fulfill food needs.

North of downtown Des Moines, the King-Irving, Riverbend, Mondamin Presidential and New Vision neighborhoods experience higher rates of food issues than the city at large. These neighborhoods are more racially diverse and poorer (on average) than the rest of the city. While the city population is roughly 13% black or African American, this region is comprised of 32% black or African American people. Likewise, the population of Des Moines is about 12% Latinx while the King-Irving area is 25% Latinx.

These neighborhoods also experiences higher than average levels of poverty (34% compared to 19% city-wide). Forty-two percent of black or African American people in these neighborhoods are in poverty; 30% of those who identify as Latinx and 33% of whites are also in poverty here. With higher racial diversity (67% minority overall), the King-Irving area is also characterized by: lower than average incomes, higher than average incarceration rates, lower than average housing quality, and a large obese and overweight population (73%) (Opportunity Atlas, 2018; Policy Link, 2018). Finally, nearly 40% of households in the area receive food stamps/SNAP benefits (American Fact Finder, 2018). \textbf{Figure 2-2} shows central Des Moines’ census tracts low-income black households. The dark region of the map highlighted by the blue square is just west of Creative Visions with an average income of $18,000. The tracts to the east (including King Irving, Riverbend, Mondamin Presidential and Evelyn Davis Park) are only slightly above this level. When all races are included, the average income rises nearly $10,000 in each census tract (Opportunity Atlas, 2018).
Within this community, there are organizations fighting for better opportunities for residents. Creative Visions is a community development non-profit located in the heart of the King-Irving neighborhood. Creative Vision’s mission is to “develop economically vulnerable individuals’ families, and communities into becoming self-empowered, self-responsible, and self-sufficient through education and economic empowerment” (Creative Visions, 2018). Creative Visions provides numerous programs ranging from traffic safety to a free clinic, dance classes to a food pantry, and has become a beacon of the community. The non-profit delivers food to homeless shelters and “tent city”, cooks meals every Sunday for any and all people, serves as a distribution center for free food rescued from nearby grocery stores, and provides food pantry services Monday through Saturday. People who qualify are allowed one pantry allocation per month. The amount of food they receive depends on the size of their family, they simply report the number and are entered into the system. Each pantry contains
canned fruits and vegetables, tomato sauce, milk, peanut butter, beans, tuna, halal meat, pasta, oatmeal, juice and sometimes extra items received that week such as fresh apples or local eggs. Creative Visions provides a vital service to the foodscape of the region.

Creative Visions uses a comprehensive approach to address community issues such as hunger, poverty, and violence, but also works within the system by relying on resources such as grants from the state and federal government and food items from the Food Bank of Iowa. As a non-profit, it functions as a part of the welfare state in which organizations perform the duties that fall through the cracks of the sovereign marketplace. Though systemic oppression persists, working within the system can be necessary for survival. Pantry items provide life-preserving supplies for residents of the region. At the same time, this system needs to be confronted in order to “break the chain of poverty and hopelessness within vulnerable communities” (Creative Visions, 2018).

Creative Visions was founded in 1996 by Ako Abdul-Samad in response to personal tragedy. Ako is not only a lifelong Des Moines resident, activist, and CEO of Creative Visions, he is also a Representative in the Iowa Legislature – one of the few Black leaders in Des Moines. He is a distinguished leader in the community and has gained international recognition for his work (with Creative Visions and beyond). Along with the Program Director, Cynthia Hunafa, Ako strives to improve the conditions in the neighborhood. Ako and Cynthia have strong roots in social justice efforts. Ako was a prominent member of the Des Moines Chapter of the Black Panther Party (BPP). With programs such as free breakfast for school-aged kids, neighborhood improvement plans, and partnerships with national welfare organizations, the BPP had massively positive effects on poor and marginalized residents of Des Moines (Fehn, & Jefferson, 2010). Ako was impacted by the work of the
BPP and the work he accomplished while involved in the organization. He has carried the principles from the BPP through to his work in Creative Visions. The emphasis on prosperity and caring for the community that were prominent in the BPP are central to Creative Visions.

Creative Visions provides vital programs and resources for the residents of Des Moines and the neighborhood in which it is located. Its food pantry provides life-preserving meals for the most vulnerable or economically disadvantaged. Its free clinic, staffed by volunteers, provides health services to those who could otherwise not afford it. Weekly events such as dance groups and yoga provide a method for community members to develop a sense of belonging and practice healthy habits.

Creative Visions has a positive impact on the community; however, non-profits are a part of the neoliberal system. Their ability to bring about change is limited by the structure of systems and the level of resources available to them. Loh and Agyeman (2017) argue that an increased role of nonprofits has “resulted in a decrease of democratic control that reduces the focus on power relations” (p. 260). In this view, non-profits actively hinder true change in the system; however, Figueroa and Alkon (2017) illustrate the importance of non-profits in food justice in their analysis of the Mandela Marketplace in Oakland. The non-profit in this initiative was integral in sustaining their for-profit market before it turned a profit. Utilizing a framework that recognized the need to operate, at least at the beginning, within the neoliberal system as well as outside of it, Creative Visions may be both hegemonic and counterhegemonic. With Ako’s history in the Black Panther Party, an anti-establishment movement focused on the good of the community and empowerment of people of color, Creative Visions was inspired by a history of counterhegemony and power confrontation.
Democratic food justice work can be an invigorating and empowering opportunity to chip away at oppressive structures. Creative Visions’ urban agriculture can be considered a step in the right direction in terms of food justice movements. Instead of the oft seen white champions of urban agriculture, the black leaders of Creative Visions have implemented garden plots and developed relationships with other food organizations in Des Moines. These methods help in fostering community involvement. “Poor communities are sometimes suspicious of the long-term implications of urban agriculture, seeing it as a new form of paternalism or impending gentrification, particularly if long-term residents are not the initiators” (Horst et al., 2017, p. 284). Creative Visions’ consistent presence as a safe, supportive space in the community means its food initiatives are likely more trusted than efforts done by anyone outside the community.

Problems in the food system exist in Des Moines as they do across the United States. The food system’s embeddedness in the political, socioeconomic, and natural environments means it cannot be separated from inequities that exist within these systems. Food production opportunities and food distribution are unevenly spread across populations, neighborhoods and regions. People with less economic, social, and political resources have more limited opportunities to participate in and reap the benefits of the food system: health and well-being. These problems weigh more heavily on people of color and the urban poor within the city. There are efforts to confront these problems, both within the neoliberal system and outside of it, through organizations such as Creative Visions. It is important to understand the history of food movements in the United States, how food relates to race and justice, and a framework with which to best address food issues and incite action to confront the inequity in Des Moines and the United States. The literature review in the next chapter explores these topics.
CHAPTER 3. LITERATURE REVIEW: CONVENTIONAL FOOD SYSTEM, ALTERNATIVE FOOD SYSTEMS, AND FOOD JUSTICE

Within the contemporary, neoliberal approach to food systems, foods is a commodity and the food system itself is a market chain. The food system’s components follow a trajectory: natural resources, primary production, processing and manufacturing, transportation, storage and marketing, consumption, and finally, health and nutrition (Pinstrup-Andersen & Watson, 2011). The food system exists within the political, biophysical, demographic, and socioeconomic environments (Pinstrup-Andersen & Watson, 2011). The food system components and the environments in which they are nested dictate how the components function and who benefits from them. Commodities are rarely distributed equally through market chains. Markets allow for actors with more capital or resources to have greater influence and accumulate more resources. Differences in education, location, skill, and other factors create disparities in access to commodities. “The global and local food systems today are characterized by a paradox of coexisting abundance and injustice” (Broad, 2016, p. 35). Despite massive technological advances in big agriculture and resulting unprecedented boost in production, millions of people do not have access to nutritious food (Clendennning, 2016). This system exists at multiples scales and overlaps a multitude of systems:

“It includes the states, corporations, and financial institutions that invest money and resources into food and agricultural development; farmers and laborers who grow crops; animals who are utilized in food production; processors who refine and package food; distributors and retailers who sell food; consumers who cook and eat food; and those involved with the infrastructures that deal with food waste.” (Broad, 2016, p. 36)
Over time, the food system has developed into a global, corporate food regime with power condensed and accessible only to those who already have it (Clendenning, 2016; Howard, 2009). Among adverse effects on other populations, this commoditization of food and concentration of power have had damaging effects on food security for urban low-income people and people of color (Slocum, 2006). High costs of living and ghettoization result in a negative impact on health and wellness (Clendenning, 2016). Alternative food movements have risen in response to the various negative impacts the conventional food system has produced. With each evolution of alternative food movements, democracy and justice tend to become more central, culminating in the concept of “food justice”.

In this research the term “justice” is based on the Rawlsian definition, explained by the planning scholar Susan Fainstein (2010). John Rawls argued that liberty and equality of opportunity are the central tenets of justice. Fainstein explains, “there should be equality of opportunity and that any inequality should be to the benefit of the least-advantaged member of society (2010, p. 15). The Rawlsian definition of justice pertains to the distribution of goods and resources. This means a just system would distribute goods equally in the absence of poverty and inequity, but when these exist, measures should be taken to address them. Fainstein uses Rawls’s concept to argue that the goals of planning should be to mitigate inequity and promote the fair distribution of benefits (2010, p. 39). Food justice adheres to this definition of justice, drawing specific attention to equity and fair distribution within the food system.

The literature on food systems, food justice, and place explains the importance of addressing food on network, organization, and individual scales. Drawing attention to the systems and organizations in the food systems, as well as people’s lived experience, is
necessary to fully address the problems we see in the system and work toward food justice. Successful food justice initiatives must include not only economic and rational details, but also emotions and relationships to food and place to provide a complete analysis and understanding of the circumstances (Delind, 2006).

**Alternative Food Movements**

Alternative food movements attempt to address a number of issues in the food system including food security, environmental justice, sustainability, quality of food, choice, and democracy (Broad, 2016). These movements respond to the food system as a social phenomenon. Their successes, shortcomings, and stakeholders have shaped the food system as we see it today. Alternative food movements and efforts to address food insecurity in the system originated in the 1960s and 1970s civil rights period. Black power organizations such as the Black Panther Party and anti-hunger groups developed programs to address nutrition issues for inner city children (Gottlieb & Fisher, 1996 p. 196). Since then, alternative food movements have evolved with different focal points such as animal welfare, public health, environmental quality, and social reform (Barbera & Dagnes, 2015; Broad, 2016; Clendenning, 2016). A shift in recent years has broadened the focus of alternative food movements to include community as well as personal food security addressing issues such as transportation, price, nutrition, environmental hazards, ownership, place, and more (Gottlieb & Fisher, 1996). Alternative food movements are “social innovation built from the bottom-up” that offer an “alternative to the mass food market” in order to address inequity and inaccessibility to food (Barbera & Dagnes, 2015).
Alterative food movements largely center on “a politics of consumption” for much of recent history; their ability to move into critical political spaces that situate food inequity in a neoliberal system have been limited (Alkon & Guthman, 2017; Pudilo, 2016). A politics of consumption revolves around the idea that people can “vote with their forks” to create political change, but this does not address power structures in food systems and political systems at large (Broad, 2016). Critics argue that these movements have failed to recognize the inherent racist and classist ideologies that act as scaffolding in the neoliberal framework and system (Bradley & Herrera, 2016; Pudilo, 2016).

Though alternative food movements often champion equity and access to healthy food, “progressive food movement projects have been shown to disproportionately serve the interests of those who are already economically advantaged, and, most often, white communities” (Broad, 2016, p. 52). Many of the leaders of alternative food movements through time have failed to address the racial and cultural differences that exist in the food system (Meenar & Hoover, 2012). “Solutions” provided by these movements have reified “market-based solutions and bolster a neoliberal ideal that absolves government and policymakers of responsibility” (Broad, 2016, p. 52). The neoliberal framework has created a “shadow state” (Wolch, 1990) in which non-profits and volunteer organizations have taken on the assistance roles for which government was previously responsible.

Alternative food movements work within the conventional market-based system and accept the neoliberal ideology that the free market can fix the inequity it has caused. Some alternative food movements have disregarded issues of ownership, governance and democracy by focusing only on access and an assumption that local, sustainable food is universally good (Bradley & Herrera, 2016). Though there is no shortage of alternative food
movements and markets, we have yet to see sustainable change in the food system and improved access for the food insecure and hungry. The next section explores some of the prominent alternative food movements that focus on access to healthy food before explaining why the food justice framework is the best model to address the current inequities within the food system in the US. Food justice calls attention to systemic inequities and considers positionality within the neoliberal landscape, counter-hegemonic challenges, lived experience, existing networks, and place. Table 3-1 presents common alternative food movements, the scale at which they approach food, and their characteristics.

**Local Food Movement**

A response to the issues of the conventional global food system is one that emphasizes local foods and the relationship between producers and consumers. The local food movement argues for people to purposefully buy from local producers in order to build a local food system (Hinrichs & Allen, 2008). Buying local food is championed because it is said to replenish the local economy, maintain relationships among community members, and support small scale farmers who, it is assumed, use good agricultural practices and provide safe, healthy food (Hinrichs, 2003). Local food movements also draw attention to the environmental impacts involved in large scale agriculture and transportation of food. What Hinrichs and Allen call “Buy Local Food” campaigns have, to a larger degree, brought economic, ethical, and social justice priorities to the forefront. Campaigns such as Buy Local or Buy Black are movements of selective patronage, these researchers explain, which have succeeded in varying degrees in social justice efforts. Buy Local Campaigns (BLC) gained traction in the 1990s across a number of grassroots organizations aimed at “supporting small
Table 3-1. Food System Characteristics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scale</th>
<th>Food System/Movement</th>
<th>Characteristics</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>System</td>
<td>Conventional food system (neoliberal model)</td>
<td>• Focus on profit and commoditization of food</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Concentrates power at the top</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Paradox of overproduction and hunger</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Assumes the market will fix problems</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Ignores power structures, histories, oppressive systems</td>
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<tr>
<td>Place</td>
<td>Local food movement:</td>
<td>• Build a local food system</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Build relationships between producers and consumers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Promotes sustainable practices (theoretically)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Lack of social justice focus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Problems of scale – local is not always best</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Simplifies a complex food system</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Place</td>
<td>Food desert</td>
<td>• Measure distance to grocery stores and/or supermarkets</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Incomplete picture – small scale stores, ethnic markets not accounted for</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Parameters do not fit every region</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Implies a capitalist, market-oriented fix</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Devalues agency of people in “food deserts”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individual</td>
<td>Moralization of Food</td>
<td>• Food choice tells who is moral and who is not</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Creates “unhealthy others” – usually women, poor, or people of color</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Ignores inequitable distribution of healthy food items, cultural differences</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Demonizes people for inability to participate in market or for participating in an “unhealthy” market</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Focused on African Americans as “unhealthy others”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>System, Place, &amp; Individual</td>
<td>Food justice</td>
<td>• Community-based</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Community-led</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Recognizes historic economic and racial oppression</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Multi-scalar analysis</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Driven by lived experiences</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Action-oriented</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

scale, local farms and stimulating [...] coordinated exchange within the local food system” (Hinrichs & Allen, 2008, p. 234).

BLCs largely focus on the benefits of keeping capital in the local economy, and recognize the importance of economic empowerment, but do not draw specific attention to
inequity. “The very premises of selective patronage campaigns can produce social justice ‘blinders’” (Hinrichs & Allen, 2008, p. 339). BLCs may help certain groups prosper in a community while ignoring other economic, social, or political issues that are present. Hinrichs and Allen provide the example of a campaign that distinguished cigars made by an association of exclusively white men from cigars made by Chinese immigrants. The campaign promoted cigars made by white men and argued that the cigars made by Chinese immigrants were inferior. In this case, selective patronage was used to pursue racist efforts (p. 339). Social justice and inclusionary processes must be integrated into Buy Local campaigns for their success and intentional implementation.

Hinrichs and Allen explain that “local” does not necessarily mean best. Born and Purcell (2006) continue this argument, warning of the “the local trap” food activists often fall into. The local food movement, thought to bring about greater democracy and prosperity, can instead result in an oligarchy. Localization “confuses ends with means, or goals with strategies” and is treated “as an end in itself rather than as a means to an end, such as justice, sustainability, and so on” (Born & Purcell, 2006). Local food is not inherently good. Broader socio-political considerations must be added to the framework for it to accomplish meaningful, just change in the food system.

**Food Deserts**

One of the best-known concepts in food studies is the food desert. “The USDA defines an urban food desert as an area that has limited access to affordable and nutritious food, where at least one-fifth of the population lives under the poverty line, and where there is no supermarket within a one-mile radius” (Steele, 2014). Food deserts are often discovered with the use of Geographic Information Systems (GIS) technology. Food deserts are typically
characterized by numerous fast-food and convenience store options but no access to fresh foods such as fruits and vegetables. The foods available in these regions are thought of as highly processed and preserved rather than fresh (Broad, 2016).

The food desert concept is widely used in food studies but often fails to accurately depict what is happening in the food system of a region. Using the food desert methodology, distance to grocery stores are measured. Yet, the strict criteria used does not always accurately capture the truth of the region. The food desert framework generally fails to account for small ethnic stores that may be important for the residents of a region. Supermarkets are a reliable source of food, but “[food desert language] may inadvertently devalue other sources of healthy food such as small grocery stores and ethnic markets in particular” (Jossart-Marcelli, Rossiter, & Bosco, 2017). The failure to recognize these markets as legitimate sources of adequate nutritious foods exhibits a lack of understanding about the neighborhood in which research is situated. It “suggests a devaluation of poor people and their agency in navigating their food environments and a parallel devaluation of existing businesses, some of which are owned and operated by local residents and immigrants” (Jossart-Marcelli, et al., 2017, p. 1646). These small markets, particularly ethnic markets, also provide culturally appropriate foods to the people in a neighborhood (Short, Guthman, & Raskin, 2007). Ethnic markets provide important resources for certain people in a neighborhood but can also be exclusive in their community service.

Placing such intense value on supermarkets, too, implies the solution must be a grocery store or “corporate-driven food enterprise” reliant on the idea that the market-model is superior to alternative markets (Figueroa & Alkon, 2017, p. 208). Rather than confronting the systemic challenges in the distribution of food and food resources, the food desert
analysis calls for a market-based fix: the addition of a grocery store or supermarket. Rather than a solution that involves economic or wide-scale development, corporate food structures are touted as the solution.

Researchers argue that the food desert measurement devalues the agency of people in these neighborhoods by arguing for a prescribed solution to a problem that may not necessarily exist for them. In order to gain a true understanding of a foodscape, community members need to be included in (and ideally lead) the conversation. The food desert concept can tolerate the proscriptive, neoliberal “fix” that does not address the real issue in a neighborhood. It does not address the perpetual inequities rooted in history and the economic system. Qualitative, place-based research is necessary to gain an understanding of the needs of a community.

**Moralization of Food**

A common underlying ideology in alternative food movements is the moralization of food and food choice. Bradley and Hererra (2016) provide a thorough explanation of the moralization of food and why it is problematic. Though moralization is common in food justice movements, the moralization of food choices creates the concept of ‘unhealthy others’ and the moral “internalizations are both reinforced by and reinforce the institutionalization of racism masquerading as scientific knowledge” (p. 101). Food choice, however, is not always possible for those who are vilified by this ideology.

This ideology asserts that everyone should have access to healthy and affordable food options and, once access is granted, people make the “right” food choices. A person who eats kale is more moral than a person who eats French fries. The moralization of food choices implies a responsibility to local farmers, the environment, and an act of resistance against fast
food and corporate food regimes. Seeing food choice as moral means that those who make the opposite choices are less moral. Likely, these “unhealthy others” are women, low-income, or people of color. The lack of participation in “moral” food choice is “justification for denial of their rights” (p. 102).

A massive focus has been placed on the problem of obesity, particularly among urban poor and African American populations (Betancourt, 2003; Campos, Saguy, Emsberger, Oliver & Gaesser, 2005; Kurtz, 2013). To be sure, obesity among African Americans has been documented in the literature: “since the 1980’s, the proportion of black adolescence in the United States who are overweight has increased 120 percent, over twice the rate of white adolescents” (Kurtz, 2013, p. 249). An enduring focus on obesity has created a “moral panic” that is contested by some food activists and scholars. “The vast majority of people in the ‘overweight’ and ‘obese’ categories are now at weight levels that are only slightly higher than those they or their predecessors were maintaining a generation ago” (Campos, et al., 2005, p. 55). Such a focus on body image, as with the moralization of certain foods, asserts that those with a particular body type are better or more moral. It relies on the “white way is the right way” mentality and a specific archetype toward which people should strive (Bell & Valentine, 1997; Saguy & Riley, 2005).

Overall, many scholars have critiqued the historic focus on simply the negative health effects of certain foods and subsequent demonization of foods and peoples (Alkon et al., 2013; Halkier, 2013; Stehr & Adolf, 2010). It has been argued that too much attention has been paid to food and choice when, in fact, choice is often not part of the equation for marginalized peoples. Alkon et al. (2013) found that “cost, not lack of knowledge or physical distance, is the primary barrier to healthy food access” (p. 126). These researchers examined
low-income people’s food habits in five regions to understand what is truly happening on the ground. The finding that price is the most important consideration in buying foods exposes the false narrative of low-income individuals as in need of education; it also confronts the oft-cited ‘solution’ of proximal grocery stores. It exposes the deeper socio-economic barriers to certain people’s right to obtain adequate and healthy nutrition.

Neoliberal capitalism adds to the moralization of food by permeating society with the belief that participation in the market-based economy is a moral action. Those who cannot participate in this economy (by buying the correct foods) are demonized. This economic framework argues that people create market change through their purchases, but many people who are in need of food justice are on the periphery of this system. Further, there is evidence that the corporate food regime has advocated for specific food items rather than responding to product demand (Broad, 2016).

Finally, the dominance of many food justice initiatives by white people creates an added layer of complexity in food movements. Because white people have historically, systemically held power in socio-economic and political systems, there is a perpetual ideology that “the white way is the right way” (Johnson, et al., p. 102; Harper, Sands, Horowitz, Totman, Maitin, Rosado, Colon & Alger, 2017). The “belief that eating local kale is morally best reinforces power structures” and unequal race relations in alternative food movements (Johnson et al., p. 101). Rather than focusing on the real issue of access to healthy food, this framework chastises people for their food choices when, in reality, they have no choices.
Self-Determination – and Its Absence

Self-determination, or the ability of a person or group to make autonomous decisions about their own lives, is an issue in alternative food movements. Alternative food movement leadership positions, even in communities of color, have often been filled by whites or those outside the community. Food justice, as Broad and others argue, must recognize the lived experiences of the people involved in and benefitting from the changes. Many alternative food movements are dominated by white elites even when attempting to address racial disparities in the food system (Figueroa & Alkon, 2017; Bradley & Hererra, 2016).

Bradley and Hererra draw attention to a movement both researchers had experience with called the Community Food Security Coalition (CFSC) which refused to recognize the need for representation of people of color on their board or in leadership roles whatsoever (Bradley & Herrera, 2016; Broad, 2016). The CFSC lost momentum and support from the broader community. Alternatively, Figueroa and Alkon call attention to two alternative food movements, Oakland’s Mandela Marketplace and Chicago’s Healthy Food Hub, in which people of color fill leadership positions. “We argue that although alternative foods are broadly culturally coded as affluent and white, these organizations are simultaneously embedded in and draw from the cultural specificities and racialized lived experiences of their neighbors” (2017, p. 206). The two ventures they study are largely successful and empower people of color though economic and social means. The alternative food movements in Oakland and Chicago are representative food justice movements, fulfilling multidimensional needs of the people and the communities they serve.
What is Food Justice?

The food justice movement is an alternative food movement that fully addresses the socio-political issues ingrained in the conventional food system as well as other alternative food movements. Rasheed Hislop (2014) argues that food justice is “the struggle against racism, exploitation, and oppression taking place within the food system that addresses inequality’s root causes both within and beyond the food chain” (p. 19). Food justice is deeply collaborative and relies on community rather than individual market behavior to identify and work toward a brighter future (Broad, 2016; Figueroa & Alkon 2017). In his 2016 book *More Than Just Food: Food Justice and Community Change*, Dr. Garrett Broad (Department of Communication and Media Studies at Fordham University) argues for a food justice framework that recognizes inequity in the food system and its connection to historical racism and economic discrimination. Food justice not only addresses issues alternative food movements have focused on, but also recognizes the complexity of the food system and that its problems are connected to broad social issues. Broad explains: “food justice, I came to learn, had emerged as a counter-force in the United States, not only to the problems of the industrial food system but also to those alternative food networks that tended not to place social justice in a position of primacy” (Broad, 2016, p. 7). Food justice requires examination of networks, narratives, and inclusion of community-oriented action. It is a framework of resistance against an inequitable and unjust food system.

Building on previous scholarship around food justice as well as his own work in Los Angeles, Broad presents four necessary elements of a successful food justice organization. He states that food justice initiatives must:

1. *Be driven by local storytelling about food and justice* – conversations that emerge from lived experience and historical
realities, are rooted in place, and are grounded in community-based collaboration.

2. Be characterized by a theory of change that situates local food system struggles within broader legacies and visions of social justice activism.

3. Cultivate networked partnerships that provide programmatic and fiscal sustainability.

4. Exhibit a willingness and capacity to develop community-focused action into larger-scale cultural and political transformation (p. 26).

Food justice initiatives must “be driven by local storytelling” because through storytelling “we can understand social action and knowledge practices” (p. 29). Stories and narratives shape perspective, social norms, and motivate action. Narratives explain identity and culture that explain how we see and understand the world. Only with this understanding can food justice initiatives be effective (Figueroa & Alkon, 2017).

Food justice initiatives must work within the context within which they are situated. Specific traits of a place and community are important to recognize in order to fulfill the specific needs of the community. The local, regional, national and international scales are all relevant in food systems (Born & Purcell, 2006). Food systems are rooted in historical oppression, systemic racism, and economic oppression (Broad, 2016). “A number of scholars and activists had begun to point out, [alternative food movements] often lacked substantive participation from those community members who actually faced the challenges of food injustice themselves” (Broad, p. 6). The lack of participation or inclusion of community
members and, often, specifically community members of color, resulted in benefits for the already well-off. Inclusion of the people being affected by injustices in the food system is necessary to address existing inequity. Food justice involves production, distribution, and consumption of food. If the initiative is controlled by those outside the community, the benefits will remain with them. Food justice initiatives present an opportunity for economic opportunity and increased autonomy when led by the community itself. Leadership and inclusion of people of color in food justice initiatives validates autonomy and creates community (Figueroa & Alkon, 2017; Loh & Agyeman, 2017).

Networks are a “primary analytical tool through which social change activities can be documented and assessed” (Broad, 2016, p. 28). Understanding the dynamics of the food system network explains what is happening and through which avenues. While the network analysis explains what is happening, storytelling and narratives explain how and why social change occurs (p. 28-29). Networks explain the flow of knowledge among organizations and illustrates the elaborate connections between scales (Granovetter, 1973). An understanding of the network can also reveal how and where ties can be developed and strengthened. Increased collaboration can mean increased support and resources for those organizations that lack access. In his theory of food justice, Broad asserts, “relations of power in the knowledge networks shape the way in which different types of knowledge interact and whether the interaction will lead to a new synthesis among different forms of knowledge or to appropriation and new hierarchies of power” (p. 218). In other words, networks inform us of the flow of information (knowledge) and power among organizations or groups, which is necessary to understand what is being done related to food security in Des Moines.
Network analyses can identify areas in which collaboration could be increased. Increased collaboration and cooperation among organizations, directed at weaker or more distant ties, can increase resiliency and fulfillment of services (Rongerude & Christianson, 2014) and create personal commitments and allegiances among leaders of food organizations. Collaboration allows for shared costs and risks, increased flexibility and innovation, and shared social responsibility (Camarinha-Matos, L., & Abreu, A., 2004).

Finally, food justice initiatives must “exhibit a willingness and capacity to develop community-focused action into larger-scale cultural and political transformation” (Broad, 2016, p. 26). Food justice is action-oriented. Its goals are to create systemic change that brings justice to the forefront of the food system. Figueroa and Alkon (2017) argue that community-focused action “have the greatest potential to contribute to the broader fight for food justice” (p. 210). The collective action that results from a community undertaking “improve health, create wealth, and build assets through cooperative food enterprises in low-income communities” (Mandela Marketplace, n. d.). These cooperative structures resist the neoliberal logic that individuals need to make themselves better and instead instill a sense of community and social cohesion. Place-based, community-oriented, people-of-color-led initiatives address specific needs of community (Figueroa & Alkon, 2017).

This food justice framework addresses historic and cultural inequities that exist both in the conventional food system and alternative food movements that have emerged over time. Its rootedness in community ensures its initiatives serve the populations intended to
benefit. Broad’s food justice framework necessitates multi-scalar analysis of the food system. The lived experiences of community members, organizational food justice efforts, and an understanding of the food network are all necessary components of a fruitful food justice initiative.

**The Food System in Planning**

The food system is an important but often overlooked aspect of community, regional, and urban planning. Planners have traditionally concerned themselves with land use and local or regional issues. The complexity of the food system and its global nature has made its scope outside the realm of traditional planning. Pothukuchi & Kaufman (1999) argued that planners should address the food system in their work. They assert, “food is very much an urban issue, affecting the local economy, the environment, public healthy, and quality of neighborhoods” (Pothukuchi & Kaufman, 1999, p. 217). Pothukuchi and Kaufman (1999) list reasons food is important in planning:

- Food sectors affect the city and community economy
- Residents are employed in the food industry
- Households spend 10 to 40 percent of income on food
- Agricultural preservation is a priority
- Food waste ends up in landfills
- Fertilizers and pesticides affect water quality
- Food related health problems (hunger, obesity, illness)
- Transportation to obtain food accounts for a large portion of movement
• Poor residents may require transit to obtain food
• Less affordable housing can create greater hunger due to capital prioritization
• Low-income residents rely on food banks, pantries, and kitchens that may be invisible to other income groups

Since their seminal work, some planners and planning scholars have embraced Pothukuchi and Kaufman’s inclusion of food in the planning domain. Local and regional governments have responded by creating plans and policies that “strengthen city and regional food systems” (Raja, Morgan, & Hall, 2017, p. 309). An international declaration, the 2015 Milan Urban Food Policy Act, has gained substantial support. “Globally, about 148 cities with nearly 470 million inhabitants” have agreed to the act which calls for “sustainable food systems that are inclusive, resilient, safe, and diverse” (Raja et al., 2017, p. 9). Many metro areas across the United States have given increased attention to the food system, with government and non-governmental organizations working toward improvements. In his assessment of urban food movements, Morgan explains that, “urban geographers are beginning to utilize the food justice frame to speak of ‘just urban food systems’, a prism through which they are exploring the availability of and access to nutritious food in the city,” (2014, p. 6). There is a growing movement to address zoning and other barriers to urban agriculture within local planning and policy practices in the United States.
However, Raja, Morgan and Hall (2017) argue that equity should be increasingly central in planning and food systems. Though planners have adopted plans and policies to improve food systems on local and regional scales, “mainstream planning and design practice is sidestepping normative and empirical questions about equity and inclusion in urban and regional food systems” (Raja et al., 2017, p. 310). Planners have focused on bringing food into communities but not on using food as a means to generate income, nor the historic marginalization of communities of color within food systems (p. 310). Failed public policy has shifted the narrative about food systems and communities of color and contributed to a loss of land owned by black farmers accompanied by an increase in farm land owned by white farmers (p. 310). These scholars differentiate alternative food systems as a ‘lever’ of equity or a ‘space’ of change. An alternative food system must be both a lever and a space by holding equity as a central goal while also acknowledging place and the community being affected by the changes. These concepts of lever and space align with Broad’s food justice framework. Planners work across multiple agencies and on different scales. Employing food justice in planning ensures planners increase equity and justice, both in processes and outcomes (Morgan, 2014).
CHAPTER 4. METHODS

Broad’s (2016) food justice framework calls for food movements to be: driven by lived experiences and rooted in place; characterized by an understanding and recognition of inequity and a focus on social justice; collaborative and network-oriented; and community-focused while maintaining the potential to transform political action. These requirements are intended to ensure that food justice is people-oriented and place-based, providing the opportunity to increase equity and wellbeing for marginalized groups. In this research, I use Broad’s requirements as guidelines as well as evaluative tools. Broad focuses on food justice movements, but I employ his guidelines to research; this is because this research is action-oriented and focused on community development. These requirements are necessary both in praxis and in goal-setting. This framework recognizes the importance of lived experiences, the political landscape of the region (or place), representation from the community, and the capacity to create large action and change; the methods I employ do the same.

In order to understand what food means in Des Moines, I investigate this question on three scales. To understand the meaning of food to the network of organizations in Des Moines, I sent a survey (Appendix A) to key personnel at the organizations including questions about collaboration, resources, and the state of food in Des Moines. To understand the meaning of food at the organization level, I worked with Creative Visions staff and conducted interviews with them. To understand the meaning of food on the individual level, I employed photovoice, a Participatory Action Research method in which participants take photos and then provide narratives that explain them. The photovoice project was conducted with six high school students from Roosevelt High School. I will explain each research technique in more detail.
Network Analysis

In this study, the network analysis provides a picture of the ties among food organizations such as food pantries, vendors, community gardens, government offices, meal services and more. Network analyses examine the connectivity of organizations. Network analyses are used to examine “the number of connections, strength of connections, and degree of influence within the network” (Rongerude & Christianson, 2014) of organizations. Using a communication ecology perspective, Broad (2016) argues for “investigations of networks and narratives” to understand and address food justice issues (p. 27). Network analyses have often been used to identify why social change happens while narratives explain how. Both are necessary components in providing a comprehensive picture of the complexity of the food system.

This study uses a network analysis of local food organizations to understand what food means in the city of Des Moines. These relationships tell a story in themselves; they explain which organizations have similar goals or strategies; who or what is most established in the region; and how social change efforts may be bolstered through relationship development. Food organizations include: grocery stores, county and state health and wellness departments; government entities; non-profits; churches involved in food charities; food banks and pantries; soup kitchens; restaurants that donate food or time; and notable community members involved in food. The network analysis has the ability to show strengths and weaknesses of the system and can increase collaboration and cooperation so the food insecure population of Des Moines can be better served.

The survey distributed to food organizations provided key data to complete a network analysis of food organizations in Des Moines. I identified key personnel at food organizations in Des Moines and administered the survey by email. The survey asked for
organization information, such as what the organization does and what its mission is. The largest section of the survey asked about organizational collaboration. Participants were asked to identify from a list organizations they currently work with. It then asked which three collaborative partners are most important. The survey also included questions to be ranked (strongly agree, somewhat agree, neither agree nor disagree, somewhat disagree, or strongly disagree) pertaining to their organization’s performance in the Des Moines food system as well as the performance of the Des Moines food system at large. Finally, the survey asked participants to identify obstacles to collaboration, methods with which to improve the Des Moines food system, and explain their vision for the Des Moines food system.

**Community Perspective**

The second scope of analysis in this research is the organization level. Individual organizations are vital in food justice initiatives. Organizations act as a tie between the food system (network) and individual experiences of people in a given place. Creative Visions’ role in the community allows for opportunities to create change in place as well as change in the network of food organizations of the city. Though non-profit entities are a part of the neoliberal system (Loh and Agyeman, 2017) they have played important roles in other food justice initiatives, working both within and outside of the system to create change. Prior to the beginning of this study, I volunteered at Creative Visions, working in the food pantry one to two times per week. I developed rapport with staff members and built relationships, sharing and learning about one another while learning about Creative Visions’ food assistance programs. I built trust with the staff members of the organization over the months.

For this research, I conducted interviews with Creative Visions staff members. I asked questions about what food means to them on a personal level as well as the
organizational level. My goal in these interviews was to understand how the organization positions itself within the food system and what their goals in the food system. I conducted these interviews after I had developed trusting relationships with the staff members of the organization and learned about their food programs. These interviews are important because they allow an analysis of the perceived role of the organization as well as its goals.

**Participatory Action Research (PAR)**

Participatory Action Research (PAR) challenges the problems that exist in many alternative food movements through its inclusive and democratic traits. Participatory Action Research ensures community needs are being met by asking community members to identify or define the problems and potential solutions they see and live every day. This methodology directly opposes the typical scientific methodology in which “experts” identify problems, perform experiments, and prescribe solutions. Rather than a researcher prescribing expert knowledge to a situation, PAR relies on the participants to develop knowledge, recognizing that “all research is embedded within a system of values and promotes some model of human interaction,” (Brydon-Miller, Greenwood, & Maguire, 2003, p. 11). Not only do participants benefit from PAR, but the researchers are often “profoundly changed” by their work (p. 14).

Grounded in Paulo Freirie’s concept of critical consciousness, the recognition that lived experiences deserve attention and that intervention/improvements should be based on them, is the underlying declaration of PAR and photovoice. Participatory Action Research’s confrontation of the traditional scientific method mirrors counter-hegemonic and empowering practices of true food justice initiatives. Its place-based nature and focus on democracy and inclusion allow it to recognize the humanity of the world in which participants live and the complexity of lived experience. It challenges the hierarchy of the
traditional research structure which places researcher above research participant and it hinges on the belief that people know what they need.

Photovoice, the method of PAR used in this research, has been shown to inspire political activism in areas such as ecosystem restoration, women’s empowerment, congressional action and more (Bell, 2008). Photovoice results in meaningful exposure of problems and potential solutions. At its core, photovoice is a way for participants to tell stories about lived experiences. In this way it aligns with Broad’s (2016) food justice framework. It addresses the requirement that food justice initiatives must “be driven by local storytelling about food and justice – conversations that emerge from lived experience and historical realities, are rooted in place, and are grounded in community-based collaboration” (p. 26). Photovoice is a methodology “rooted in democratic ideals [and] entails providing people with cameras so that they can photograph their everyday realities” (Wang, 2006, p. 183). It leans on the idea that photographs can incite emotion and action for community members, policy makers, and increase awareness and wellbeing. This human element of emotional response can impact decision-makers to increase justice in the system as well as empower participants and observers toward political action.

Deeply rooted in collaborative action methodologies, PAR requires the recognition of local or lay knowledge as relevant and important. It also necessitates authentic dialogue and joint-fact finding; the researcher-participant relationship shift from the traditional positivist hierarchy to one in which all are involved in problem identification and problem solving creates a different relationship. The “expert” title is moot; each person is the expert in their own life. The photovoice methodology puts the power in the hands, or lenses, of those who live the experiences or phenomena being studied.
Wang (2006) outlined the three main goals of photovoice: “to enable people to (1) record and represent their everyday realities; (2) promote critical dialogue and knowledge about personal and community strengths and concerns; and (3) reach policymakers” (p. 148). It emphasizes individual and community action, or grassroots social change, and is designed to touch policy makers. I believe Wang articulates this methodology best with: “photovoice embraces the basic principles that images carry a message, pictures can influence policy, and citizens ought to participate in creating and defining the images that make healthful public policy” (2004, p. 911).

With the belief that photographs can influence our understanding of the world and, in turn influence policy, Wang developed the SHOWeD method:

1. What do you See here?
2. What is really Happening?
3. How does this relate to Our lives?
4. Why does this problem, condition, or strength exist?
5. What can we Do about it?

These questions facilitate discussion, relate to personal, lived experiences, and ask for solutions that can be carried out on the community or policy level. Discussion of intimate or personal experiences also helps participants build long term relationships among community members that can result in collective action (Wang, 1999). In other photovoice studies, participants reported feeling empowered, more self-aware, and more reflective in action (Johnson, et al., 2017; Valera, Gallin, Schuk, & Davis, 2009; Leung, Agaronov, Entwistle, Harry, Sharkey-Buckley, & Freudenberg, 2016). Several recent studies have used photovoice to understand local food systems, health, and food justice (Harper, Sands, Horowitz, Totman,
Maitin, Rosado, Colon & Alger, 2017; Leung, et al, 2016). These studies reported positive impacts such as knowledge sharing and development as a group; empowerment of youth participants; growing awareness of issues in food; and finally, appropriate and practical responses to the problems identified in the studies (Valera, Gallin, Schuk, & Davis, 2009; Madrigal, Salvatore, Casillas, Casillas, Vera, Eskenazi, & Minkler, 2014; Johnson, Steeves, Gewanter, & Gittelsohn, 2017). Photovoice studies have been used with vulnerable populations with positive results related to empowerment, knowledge building, awareness, and political action.

Roosevelt High School is the largest high school in Des Moines with much racial, ethnic, and income diversity. According to Public School Review, Roosevelt is in the top 10% of Iowa schools in terms of diversity and top 1% in student body size (serving 1,793 students in grades 9-12) (2019). Much of this large student body is Black, with a minority enrollment of 48%. Public School Review uses a tool called the “diversity score” which is the likelihood that two students, chosen at random, will have different ethnicities. Compared to the low state average of 0.23, Roosevelt boasts a score of 0.66, meaning this school is much more diverse than the Iowa average. The experiences of these youth are important in understanding what is happening in the Des Moines food system and what issues are the most urgent to address.

In working with students from Roosevelt High School, I gain a unique perspective on the food system. Youth have a distinctive relationship to food. They are often not expected to fend for themselves when it comes to food and often do not have to financially support themselves or others. Youth also participate in school institutions as well as family and community dynamics. As we are in a critical political point in history, youth activism and
empowerment are more important than ever, especially for youth of color. Income inequality, especially along racial lines, is rising in the United States (Thiede, Sanders, & Lichter, 2017). This inequity affects people of all ages. If a person is born poor, they are more likely to stay poor as they age; this is what researchers call “the American Pipeline.” Youth are given few opportunities to influence the direction of their lives with such strong structural inequity (Thiede, Sanders & Lichter, 2017). Food security is deeply intertwined with economic prosperity; youth activism can help combat issues of inequity in both interrelated realms.

**Positionality**

Participatory Action Research requires an examination and revaluation of the hierarchical researcher-subject framework. In so doing, and in its foundation in feminist methodology, it asks the researcher to reflect on their positionality. Muhammad, et al. argue that the principles of participatory research “cannot be realistically applied unless unequal power relations are identified and addressed” and further, researcher identity must be considered (Muhammad, Wallerstein, Sussman, Avila, Belone, & Duran, 2015, abstract). Recognizing positionality rejects the traditional scientific belief that researchers can be impartial and unbiased. Perceptions affect the way researchers experience and interpret data (England, 1994). Particularly in research involving race and ethnicity, “dangers seen, unseen, and unforeseen can emerge when researchers do not pay careful attention to their own and others’ racialized and cultural systems of coming to know, knowing, and experiencing the world” (Milner, 2007, p. 388). Additionally, with such personal and in-depth research as PAR, researcher-participant relationships are integral to the integrity of the study. PAR is built on trust and trust requires personal bonds and reciprocity.
Researchers may be insiders or outsiders in a given study, or have some traits of both insider and outsider. An insider is someone who shares common traits with the study subjects. For instance, a Somali immigrant conducting research with a Somali immigrant community will be considered an insider in many respects. However, they may also be an outsider if they are from a different region, are a different gender, or exhibit some other difference. Insiders and outsiders may have access to different kinds of data and understanding (Kusow, 2003). “Rather, they form partnerships with community members to identify issues of local importance, develop ways of studying them, collect and interpret data, and take action on the resulting knowledge.” (Smith, Bratini, Chambers, Jensen, & Romero, 2010, p. 407-408). For different studies, insider or outsider status may be more appropriate. Trust may vary depending on this status but can be built or degraded with actions.

PAR seeks to equalize the power, or at least recognize the power structure and work to interrupt it, in the researcher-participant relationship. By recruiting participants to be co-researchers rather than subjects we begin this process, but political and social attributes of the researcher and participants must be considered. My authority as an adult, a university student, and the organizer of this project create certain dynamics and power structures that are implied by my and the participants’ societal standings (Ritchie, Lewis, Nicholls, & Ormston, 2014). Social science has examined the dynamics of perception of others and the effects these have. The way I look, sound, and act have an impact on my validity in the eyes of others and my relationship with them. In some ways, I present as more of an expert: I am a graduate student at Iowa State University; in others, an outsider: I am a white woman from suburbia Ames without any significant economic burdens. I graduated with a class of 88 while they are in classes of over 500; I have tattoos and piercings and look much different
than them. My experience is empirically different than those of the participants, but there are always characteristics or likenesses that can be found. The differences and likenesses between participants and myself have an effect on the dynamics of our relationship, regardless of the effort I exert in an attempt to minimize these effects. In order to create the best environment, I must acknowledge differences, likenesses and biases. This is vital to the cogency of my own analysis.

My unique position as an outsider but also volunteer for the organization allowed me to see political hierarchies, bureaucratic control, and identify conditions of resistance in a welfare agency (Burawoy, 1991, p.1). There are many attributes that make me an outsider in this region. Besides those listed above, I have gauged ears and visible tattoos. I probably do not look like a typical researcher. I identify as a member of the LGBTQ community, which places me in a marginalized group different but not necessarily separate from many of the individuals in this community. Additionally, I have Type 1 Diabetes. In my volunteer time at Creative Visions I bonded over troubles with sugar with the Community Safety Officer of the organization. Though he had Type 2, we had a shared experience. In my conversations with staff members I have also been able to make clear my opinions on inequity and racial biases in society, which are comparable to many of their opinions. Of course, our life experiences with such concepts are quite different.

Volunteering at Creative Visions helped to build trust between staff and myself and provided an opening to shift part of my identity or position from outsider to insider. During this time, I developed relationships and became familiar with the leaders, staff members, and patrons of Creative Visions, speaking freely and openly together. The connections I formed during this time fostered a bond and a sense of trust and reciprocity with the members of the
organization. Additionally, between recruitment and the onset of the photovoice research, I met with the Roosevelt High participants at a coffee shop. I felt it was important to meet at a place with food options, and treated participants to something from the shop during our short, informal meet up. During this meeting, we got to know one another and bonded over shared interests.

Research Process

I started my study in December 2018 after initial approval from the Institutional Review Board. At that time, I administered a survey and began recruitment for the photovoice project. I encountered barriers in conducting the photovoice study. To begin recruitment, I created a flyer and placed it on the bulletin boards at Creative Visions. With my weekly presence in the building, the promise of compensation, and the opportunity to be included in an art show, I believed this would be enough. After a few weeks and no participants, I switched tactics and started working with Langston, a staff member at Creative Visions, who had contacted Roosevelt High School. After speaking with the groups of students involved in diverse/inclusive leadership clubs, I distributed all forms necessary for the project: parent/guardian informed consent, informed assent, copyright permissions and image release forms. All participants were required to bring a signed parent/guardian informed consent form to the first official meeting per ISU requirements. Modeling my research after previous photovoice studies (Bell, 2008; Harper, Sands, Totman, Maitin, Rosado, Colon, & Alger, 2017; Johnson, et al., 2017; Knowles, Rabinowich, Gaines-Turner, & Chilton, 2015; Leung, Agaronov, Entwistle, Harry, Sharkey-Buckley & Freudenberg, 2016; Madrigal, et al., 2014; Teti et al., 2012; Wang, 1999 & 2004) I held three events:
- Conversation 1: A focus group style meeting to introduce the project, go over camera basics, explain all forms, and explain the premise and goals of the project

- Conversation 2: A private meeting between myself and each participant (or pair of participants, whichever they preferred) to go through photos, obtain narratives to accompany the photos, and select photos for the art show; use SHOWeD method to facilitate discussion

- Community Gallery Show (April 6, 2019): Printed photos and accompanying narratives were displayed at Creative Visions; community members, policymakers, Iowa State students and general public were invited. All were welcome.

   Following Finch, Lewis and Turley’s (2014) focus group outline, I set the scene, asked for individual introductions, introduced the topic, fostered a discussion, and explained the next steps of the project. Our discussions were set in a conference room or the main room in Creative Visions. This allowed for enough privacy to speak freely as well as incorporating the community services of the non-profit. These conversations occurred on Sunday during Creative Visions’ Sunday meals. Typically, a free meal can be picked up or eating in Creative Visions in the large gathering area on the ground floor. Participants had the option of eating one of these daily meals, but I also brought food and beverages to these conversations. It felt important to include a meal when we met because of its impact on socializing together and, of course, because it is the focus of this study.

**IRB Process**

The IRB process was more complicated for me than for many at such a quantitative-heavy research school. Very few photovoice studies have come out of the university prior to this research, indicating that the methodology is not typical for the IRB to evaluate.
Grounded theory requires development of theories through the research process. It is inductive rather than deductive. Additionally, the community-based nature of this research made the board question whether it is truly research because the “generalizable” necessity for a project to be considered research. The IRB questioned whether I needed to submit a proposal at all.

I submitted my IRB proposal in November 2018 initially. The board asked for clarification and more specific language, particularly in regard to the possibility of youth participants. The IRB was concerned with transportation and protection of the youth because they are a vulnerable population. If we were to discuss food insecurity in any meetings, the board wanted to be sure youth participants would not be coerced or otherwise negatively affected. I worked with Cynthia at Creative Visions to ensure the forms were acceptable and the conversation topics were appropriate. She expressed concern about some of the language required of the IRB about risk, feeling it unnecessary to outline concerns of illegal activity, but approved all forms and conversation topics. Cynthia’s approval of the forms was vital in the IRB process; with community-based research (especially in marginalized communities) and PAR, community approval is very important.

After the board approved my proposal in December, I again went through full board review when I changed my recruitment method. Because I was unable to recruit participants at Creative Visions and, instead, went to Roosevelt High School, the board required approval from the Des Moines school district, new informed consent forms for any participants, and additional assurances of confidentiality and safety for the participants.

At the conclusion of my research, I went through an additional follow-up review with a representative of the IRB. The follow-up review included an interview and collection of all
consent forms, image release forms, and copyright forms. Though follow-up reviews are not typical, the complexity of this study and the photovoice aspect prompted the board to verify my compliance with the IRB protocol and procedures.

**Conclusion**

The methods utilized in this research reflect the requirements for a food justice movement. A network analysis illustrates the political and social context of a region’s organizations by showing the strength of connections among organizations as well as organizational centrality, or their influence in the network. Interviews with staff members of a community development organization involved in the food system provide insight into the efforts currently being made to reduce food insecurity and increase equity. These interviews and relationship-building also helped myself, as the researcher, build trust and rapport with the community in which I worked. Participatory Action Research and photovoice, with their emphasis on democracy and inclusion, correspond to food justice’s call for local storytelling and focus on empowerment and inclusion of marginalized voices. Each of these methods corresponds to a different scale of investigation: the network, the organization, and the individual. The following chapters provide analyses of each of these investigations.
CHAPTER 5. FOOD AS COMMODITY: NETWORK ANALYSIS AND THE DES MOINES COMMUNITY

This study uses network analysis to elucidate on the food system of Des Moines, the community, and the relationships among food organizations. According to Broad (2016), network analyses document the “connections between and among organizations, individuals, collectives, and social structures to understand the phenomena under study” (p. 28). Network analyses expose the connections among people or organizations and the flow of information, power, and influence among them. When organizations and/or people are connected to one another, they are more likely to choose the same option or path (Granovetter, 1973, p. 1376). Network analyses reveal strong ties, weak ties, people and institutions that are central in networks, and can help identify areas relationships can be improved or built upon (Cross, et al., 2017). These relationships tell a story in themselves; they explain which organizations have similar goals or strategies; who or what is most established in the region; and how food justice efforts may be bolstered through relationship development.

Important measures in network analysis are the types of ties, centrality, and structure of the network. Granovetter’s (1973) seminal work on network analyses explains the distinction between types of ties in communities. He differentiates between strong, weak, and absent ties. In social network analyses, the “strength of a tie is a combination of the amount of time, the emotional intensity, the intimacy, and the reciprocal services which characterize that tie” (Granovetter, 1973, p. 1361). An analysis of the ties between and among individuals and organizations in a community explain “why some communities organize for common goals easily and effectively whereas other seem unable to mobilize resources, even against dire threats” (Granovetter, 1973, p. 1373). Granovetter found that cliques inhibit community cohesion and that trust is essential to information dissemination and accountability. Leaders,
especially, must be viewed as trustworthy and feel a sense of obligation to other people or organizations to disseminate information and foster strong network relationships.

Ties can be strong, weak, or absent, and each type of tie implies characteristics between those involved. Weak ties link members of different groups more often than strong ones; strong ties imply larger time commitments to one another than do weak ones. Absent ties are self-explanatory – they are nonexistent. The strength of ties can “co-determine the potential for innovation, as they view information on the available resource configurations (knowledge, finance, materials) and the potential for creative recombination of knowledge, technologies and practices” (Klerx, Mierlo, & Leeuwis, 2012). The strength of ties can reveal information about where information flows and power structures within the network. The size of an organization will often influence its ties and centrality, meaning larger organizations, or organizations with more resources, will often have more power and influence over the flow of information. However, size is not the only defining factor in organizational influence in a network.

The second measure, centrality, is one of the most widely studied concepts of network analyses. Centrality refers to the “prominence of a node in the network” (Borgatti, et al., 2009). Centrality is “often interpreted in terms of the potential power that an actor might wield” because of their deep-rooted connection to others (Borgatti, et al., 2009, p. 894). Organizations that are more central have a greater potential to influence the system at large because they are important connections for many organizations. However, as Granovetter (1973) points out, more controversial programs are less likely to be adopted by central figures and more likely to be adopted by marginal figures (p. 1367). This distinction can be important when identifying target organizations to adopt innovative methods to address food
issues. It is important to consider the implications of targeting central or marginal actors, though. A marginal organization that implements innovative methods may not expose the correct people to a positive, systemic change, while a central one may; a central organization must risk more in implementing new programming, though (Granovetter, 1973).

This analysis helps us to understand how to target action to implement changes in the network. For instance, an organization with many strong ties to other organizations could be utilized in a leadership position due to their influence in the network. Understanding the strength of organizational ties in the network allows for strategic food justice implementation.

In recent years, scholars have recognized the importance of networks in alternative food movements (Levkoe, 2014; Meenar & Hoover, 2012). Networks analyses not only identify where organizations can improve collaboration, but also where barriers to action exist (Rongerude & Christianson, 2014) so they may be addressed. Particularly with food justice initiatives, “network building among diverse [alternative food initiatives] may increase the efficacy of their work by making connections between everyday life and broader social, economic and ecological issues” (Levkoe, 2014, p. 388). Especially because of a lack of funding and other resources, connections among organizations is important in alternative food movements. It is important to understand the network of food organizations in Des Moines so efforts to improve it can be precise.

**Methods**

I surveyed 44 individuals at 33 Des Moines food organizations involved in food security measures in this network analysis. Food organizations include: grocery stores, county and state health and wellness departments; Des Moines Parks and Recreation (which
maintains community gardens); non-profits; churches involved in food charities; food banks and pantries; soup kitchens; restaurants that donate food or time; and notable community members involved in food. A complete list of organizations included in this network analysis can be found in Appendix B. All of these organizations or companies were included in the survey because they play an important role in the food system. Though grocery stores do not often directly assist with food access, they often have relationships with organizations that perform “food rescue” and donations. For instance, Creative Visions receives bread and other baked goods from a nearby grocery store that the store deemed unsellable but still completely edible. The aesthetic stipulations of the food in grocery stores results in large amounts of food waste (de Hooge, Oostindjer, Aschemann-Witzel, Normann, Mueller Loose, & Lengard Almli, 2017). By accepting and using foods that are not aesthetically perfect, non-profits involved in food rescue save money, help their clients, decrease organic material in landfills and help mitigate overproduction (Scott Kantor, Lipton, Manchester, & Oliveira, 1997).

In addition to non-profits and groups involved in food access, governmental agencies are important players in access, food safety, and efforts to increase wellbeing for citizens. Departments that provide health and human services are intimately connected to the food system because good food is one of the most basic needs to fulfill health requirements. Government agencies that aid in SNAP benefits need to be included for this reason. In order to identify and understand all work related to food access and security in Des Moines, I need to understand the power structure and services available through the system in place.

Schools are another vital group of organizations included in this survey and subsequent network analysis. The Des Moines school system provides free breakfast for all students. Around three-quarters of students qualify for free lunch city-wide. In fact, in 2016,
the Des Moines school system (largely funded by the U.S. Department of Agriculture) revised their program to “cover 100% of the cost of breakfast and lunch for all students at schools identified as having a high number of students living in poverty” removing the potential stigma attached to food assistance as well as language barriers for parents applying for the program (Nguyen, 2016). Instead, all students have access to healthy meals twice a day through their schools. In this way, schools are an incredibly important part of the food system of the city.

To analyze the responses of the survey and create a network diagram, I used the program Gephi 0.9.2, an open source software, to create visual graphics of networks (Bastian & Heymann, 2009). I grouped organizations by their primary role, assigning specific colors to each group. The organizations are grouped as: food-oriented non-profits; food pantries (which fall under food-oriented non-profits); refugee-oriented non-profits; other non-profits; government entities; schools; and vendors. Organizations are “nodes” in the network analysis, while their connections are “ties”.

**Results**

Table 5-1 shows the categories and number of organizations within each category while Table 5-2 provides the color key to the network analysis graphic. Numerous non-profit entities are involved in the food system of Des Moines, so distinction among their primary goals is warranted. Specifically, food pantries are a separate category because they provide emergency food services for those who are in immediate need. Refugee-oriented non-profits often focus on food, but on the production and marketization of food rather than the right to food as discussed in the literature review.
Table 5-1. Organizational Sectors

<table>
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<th>Number</th>
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<tr>
<td>Food pantries</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Refugee-oriented non-profits</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other non-profits</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Schools</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Government entities</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vendors</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5-2. Organization Colors

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sector</th>
<th>Color</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
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<td>Food-oriented non-profits</td>
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<tr>
<td>Food pantries</td>
<td>Light blue</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Refugee-oriented non-profits</td>
<td>Yellow</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other non-profits</td>
<td>Red</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Schools</td>
<td>Purple</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Government entities</td>
<td>Pink</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vendors</td>
<td>Dark blue</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The analysis of the Des Moines Area Food System reveals strong and weak ties between organizations and the food system of the region. In Figures 5-1 through 5-4, the thickness of the connecting line between organizations is indicative of the strength, or type, of the tie or connection. The size of the node or circle that represents each organization is proportional to their centrality in the region. A larger circle means greater centrality or connectivity.

The Fruchterman-Reingold layout is a force-directive model that assumes: “vertices connected by an edge should be drawn near each other” and “vertices should not be drawn too close to each other” (Fruchterman & Reingold, 1991, p. 1131). See Figure 5-1. This model places well-connected nodes near one another and nodes with greater centrality in the center of the diagram. Des Moines Area Religious Council (DMARC), Eat Greater Des Moines, and three refugee-oriented non-profits (EMBARC, RACI, and Global Greens) are the most central agencies with the strongest ties in this network. The City of Des Moines, Bidwell Riverside Center (a food pantry), the Polk County Health Department, and Des Moines Public Schools are secondarily central in the network. This indicates that these organizations have the most influence over the food assistance landscape of Des Moines.
Figure 5-1. Des Moines Food Organization Network

The findings from the network analysis indicate that, while connection exist among organizations, there are just a few main “hubs” that connect the entirety of food access organizations in Des Moines. When asked about the most important partners organizations work with, nearly every respondent reported that Des Moines Area Religious Council (DMARC), the Food Bank of Iowa, and Eat Greater Des Moines (EatGreaterDSM, EGDM) were the most vital partnerships to their organization. This points to the success of Eat Greater Des Moines, a food council, and also the importance of food banks in the region.

Many of the central organizations are focused on the production of food: the City of Des Moines and Global Greens maintain garden space for residents and refugees; Eat Greater Des Moines is a food system council focused on production of food; others are focused on
refugee services, such as EMBARC (Ethnic Minorities of Burma Advocacy and Resource Center) and RACI (Refugee Alliance of Central Iowa). The other most important players in the Des Moines food landscape are DMARC (food pantry and community development) and Bidwell Riverside Center (a food pantry). The network illustrates that the food system of central Iowa is focused on production of food as well as refugee services. DMARC’s and LSI’s (Lutheran Services of Iowa and Global Greens) centrality is important: it means the faith-based aid organizations are some of the most important organizations in food access and security.

**Alternative Food System as a Mirror**

The food assistance system of Des Moines mirrors the conventional food system. It largely views food as a commodity and the food system as a market chain. This is contrary to the framework in food justice movements in which autonomy and inequity in the system are addressed. This is indicated by the importance of production-oriented organizations in the region.

Food banks and pantries are criticized for failing to tend to systemic change and reinforcing injustices. Scholars and activists explain that “the emergency food system benefits big industry and the poverty-industrial complex of nonprofits at least as much as it does poor people” (Vitiello, Grisso, Whiteside, & Flschman, 2015, p. 420). Food banks reinforce these systems because they rely on wealthy volunteers and move the poor into a passive, subordinate position. Warshawsky (2018) points out that “food banks […] have been embraced for their nongovernmental funding, proximity to communities, and organizational flexibility” but the reliance on volunteerism and the separation between the source of the food and those who receive it hide hunger and inequity in the food system (p. 174). Some
food banks have embraced neoliberal strategies in order to continue operating. Their reliance on stakeholders and funding opportunities entrenched in neoliberal systems limits their ability to act politically or in a justice-oriented way. “The fact that donors, especially large corporate donors and those donating via those corporations, are separate from recipients reduces awareness of hunger, hides its structural causes, and breaks down our ability to care” (Warshawsky, 2018, p. 174). Warshawsky argues that food banks, due to their entrenchment in neoliberalism, have been pushed to focus on food waste and the environment rather than hunger.

Cloke, May, and Williams (2016) explain that food banks are generally studied with a political economy perspective or food security perspective. Evidence suggests that, as Warshawsky argues, food banks often perpetuate neoliberal hegemony; however, it would be difficult to overstate the importance of food banks and food pantries in the lives of the hungry or food insecure. They provide survival services.

The survey in this research included short answer questions as well. Respondents’ answers to these questions revealed an underlying neoliberal perspective deeper than the presence of food banks. When asked about how food access would best be improved many respondents answered that the addition of grocery stores to food deserts or low-income communities would be the most helpful. This aligns with the “food desert” framework which views the neoliberal market as the answer to issues of food access when, in fact, issues of food access are deeply entrenched in historic and economic inequity (Broad, 2016; Figueroa & Alkon, 2017). Only one respondent answered that economic investment and increased equity (through community development and increased wages) would best address food
insecurity. The majority of these answers fall within the neoliberal hegemony and, assumedly, the view of the poor as passive recipients of aid rather than autonomous citizens.

**Non-Profits in the Des Moines Food System**

*Figure 5-2* shows non-profits in Des Moines that are involved in the food system to some extent. Yellow nodes are refugee-oriented non-profits; light blue are food pantries; dark blue are food-oriented non-profits; and red are community-development or other non-profits. This figure exemplifies the prominence of food pantries, Eat Greater Des Moines, and refugee services. Eat Greater Des Moines, DMARC, and EMBARC (Ethnic Minorities of Burma Advocacy and Resource Center) are the largest nodes, indicating they are the most prominent non-profit organizations in the region. RACI (Refugee Alliance of Central Iowa), Bidwell Riverside Center (a food pantry), and the Food Bank of Iowa are the next largest nodes; next, United Way, IMPACT (a community-development organization) and Global Greens have a fairly large presence in the system.

Eat Greater Des Moines is a non-profit that “builds connections to strengthen the area’s food system”. Their “mission is to unite the community by providing quality food access for all” (Eat Greater DSM, 2019). This organization functions as a local food council, bringing people together to talk about food. It has the potential to increase democracy in the food system by including the voices of those who have not been included in the food system in the past and present structure. Food councils emphasize community food security rather than individual food security (Hassanein, 2003). Councils shift the stakeholders from corporate to community, an attempt to shift power. The prominence of Eat Greater Des Moines points to the presence of an alternative food movement in the city.
Figure 5-2. Non-profit Organizations Involved in Food Issues

**Refugee Services**

*Figure 5-3* shows the Des Moines food network with only food-oriented non-profits (without pantries) and refugee-oriented non-profits. This diagram shows the prominence of refugee programs and their connections to food organizations in the region, as well as the large number of refugee programs. Refugee-oriented non-profits in Des Moines are closely tied with one another, but not necessarily closely tied to other types of food-oriented non-profits that are not pantries.

The centrality of refugee-oriented non-profits in Des Moines illustrates the focus of the region on refugees – as well as production. With refugees from war-torn countries (Burma, Burundi, Iraq, etc.), services for refugees are extremely important in Iowa.
According to the Iowa Department of Public Health, in 2016, 1,105 primary refugees arrived in Iowa in 2016 with 85.6% of these refugees placed in Polk County (2017). Many of these refugees are under the age of 20 (around 45%) and hundreds arrive with various health issues, including diet-related issues (IDPH, 2017). Such vulnerable populations need assistance in a new landscape and culture. Organizations aid in housing, community development, transportation, legal advice, food assistance, and land procurement for production.

The prominence of refugee services as opposed to other non-profits that largely benefit residents of color in Des Moines points to a distinction between “good poor” and “bad poor” among leaders in the City. Appelbaum (2001) explains that the “underclass” or “undeserving poor” have been identified and separated from other classes or groups in society by those in power or those in the middle class. The underclass, historically, has been a term used to describe African Americans. Perceptions of the underclass include a poor work ethic; failure to adhere to societal norms; and attribution of responsibility for their poor state, or the idea that a person caused their own destitution. These ideas result in anger rather than empathy and “a lack of desire to engage in helping behavior” (Appelbaum, 2001, p. 423). The non-profit groups and programs in Des Moines reflect this mentality; refugee services may be better funded and staffed because of a perception of deservingness of different groups. Further research would be necessary to support this.
Figure 5-3. Food-Oriented Non-profits (Without Pantries) & Refugee-Oriented Non-profits of Des Moines

Strong Ties

Figure 5-4 shows the food system of Des Moines using a different distribution pattern on Gephi 0.9.2. Openord, based on the Fruchterman-Reingold, clusters nodes that are closely tied rather than distributing them evenly. The organizations in the center of this diagram are tied to more organizations than those on the periphery. Some organizations are very well connected while some organizations are weakly tied to just one or two other organizations. DMARC is central in the OpenOrd diagram. This organization is vital to the Des Moines food system and has many connections to refugee-oriented, production-oriented, and community development organizations.
The “most important” partners respondents listed on the survey were nearly always Eat Greater Des Moines, DMARC, and the Food Bank of Iowa. This represents a sort of dual identity in the Des Moines food system. Eat Greater Des Moines, as a food council, ideally shifts the conversation about people in need of food assistance and provides an opportunity for voices to be heard. Food banks, according to the literature, stifle democracy and perpetuate negative perspectives about people who need food assistance. DMARC seems to operate in the liminal space between the two extremes; the interfaith group distributes non-perishable food items and operates a food pantry, but also employs programming aimed at youth empowerment and greater food knowledge and democracy. The strong ties these
organizations have formed with other food organizations in Des Moines indicate they have more power than other organizations and more influence.

**What does it mean?**

The network analysis diagrams illustrate the strong and weak ties of organizations related to food access in Des Moines. DMARC, Eat Greater Des Moines, and the Iowa Food Bank are vital organizations in the region and collaborate with many other organizations. Refugees are a central focus of food and development in the city. Economic development surrounding food is also a focus of these organizations rather than food security for the urban poor. There is evidence that efforts are being exerted to make the food system of Des Moines a more democratic system, but also evidence of neoliberal hindrances and maintenance of the status quo. Some organizations are more strongly tied to others and some have many more ties than others. Changes in the Des Moines food system would likely be most effective central, well-connected organizations are targeted for transformative intervention.

**Perceptions on Food Access**

In addition to questions about organizational collaboration, I asked survey respondents about their perceptions of the food system of Des Moines in terms of access, security, and service to low-income populations. These perceptions provide further insight into how these organizations manage food access enterprises. In his network analysis of alternative food initiatives, Levkoe (2014) investigated some of the same concepts and perspectives. Noticing the varying degree of success of alternative food initiatives (AFIs) in the literature, Levkoe examined the networks within which a group of alternative food
initiatives operate in Canada. It is assumed that with more networking and collaboration, there is more collective action and goal attainment (Levkoe, 2014, p. 388).

Levkoe found that “a number of AFI representatives have called for more leadership and centralization in the network” in order to create more political change in the region (p. 398). The same can be said for the food organizations involved in food access in Des Moines. Figure 5-5 illustrates respondents’ general positive view of the network, but also a lack of leadership in the region. Only 10% of respondents feel their organization provides leadership in the region, whereas 60% feel their organization does not provide leadership and 30% neither agreed nor disagreed with the statement.

![Collaboration of Food Organizations in Des Moines](image)

Figure 5-5. Collaboration of Food Organizations in Des Moines

Another tension in food organization networks “results from attempts to find commonality amongst diversity” (Levkoe, 2014, p. 399). Though when asked to what extent respondents agree with the statement, “food-related organizations in Des Moines share a common goal”, this viewpoint was not reflected in the short answer questions. A common citation, when asked how the food system of Des Moines could be improved, was the
development of a shared, common goal for all organizations. Respondents reported a lack of community or shared vision for the future when asked about obstacles to collaboration. Self-interest, lack of voice, lack of autonomy, and lack of a common goal were all relayed in the short answer section of the survey.

Levkoe reported a lack of resources available for AFIs and uneven distribution of the resources that are available. Disparities in resources between AFIs was reportedly another tension between them and a barrier to building a stronger network. Distance, organization size, and resource availability affect organizational ability to participate and have a voice in the network (p. 398). The type of organization, too, likely has an impact on the resources it may or may not receive. Figure 5-6 displays respondents’ perceptions of resource allocation to their organization as well as to food organizations across Des Moines. Forty-five percent of respondents somewhat disagree that their organization receives enough resources to fulfill their mission. Fifty-five percent of respondents strongly or somewhat disagree that, “organization in Des Moines fulfill food access needs for residents”.

Figure 5-6. Resources for Food Organizations in Des Moines
Levkoe studied AFI networks in Canada because social movements, like feeding the hungry and creating a more just food system, often rely on networks to fulfill their goals (2014, p. 387). Some respondents related food issues to other societal issues and network-building. Two respondents recommended increasing collaboration with affordable housing unit managers, indicating interrelatedness of food security, housing, and economic issues. Many other respondents referenced increasing collaboration with schools. Transparency and authentic dialogue among food organizations and throughout their networks could build a stronger system resulting in better services and more resources for community food security.

**Conclusion**

The network analysis shows the connections and strength of connections among food organizations in Des Moines. By including food-oriented non-profits, food pantries, schools, government agencies, refugee-oriented non-profits, and vendors, it shows the flow of information and the hubs of power and influence in the Des Moines food system. These diagrams illustrate the focus on production and refugees in the system and the prevalence of DMARC, Eat Greater Des Moines, refugee services, and the Food Bank of Iowa. The analysis illuminates the focal points of the Des Moines food system: refugees, production, and the status quo of food pantries. Most central organizations are focused on production; such a focus may or may not align with the food justice framework.

This network analysis points to a need to develop deeper connections among organizations involved in food access in Des Moines. Greater collaboration and network development can result in better and more complete services (Levkoe, 2014) as well as
increase democracy. While Eat Greater Des Moines, DMARC, refugee services and the Iowa Food Bank are central organizations in the network and have the greatest potential for influence, place-based organizations that are on the fringes (such as Creative Visions) serve important populations. Collaboration through network development could increase the quality of services these organizations provide by increasing resource and knowledge sharing. Creative Visions and other fringe-organizations can use this information to develop important partnerships that can foster food justice. Fringe organizations can use the focus on production to get more involved with powerful organizations in the region, enhancing both organizations’ ability to fulfill their mission and goals. More collaboration will result in more democracy, and with more democracy there is also more equity.

Understanding the network of food organizations of Des Moines is imperative to increasing food justice and equity, but there are still gaps in the knowledge. Food justice initiatives must recognize the network and context, be place-based, and include the lived experiences of residents or individuals involved in the changes an initiative would manifest. In order to address these gaps, place-based organizations need to be analyzed as well as the lived experiences of people within the community.
CHAPTER 6.  FOOD AS COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT: COMMUNITY BASED ORGANIZATIONS IN THE FOOD SYSTEM

Creative Visions is a non-profit focused on community development in a low-income, highly diverse region of Des Moines. Outside the buildings are signs that say, “NO GUNS ALLOWED” and “Don’t shoot! We have the right to grow up” with a picture of a black baby and a white baby sitting together. There is a community garden to the side of the building where staff members plant vegetables and herbs every summer, and a hill on which the staff envisions an outdoor classroom in the future. The sign is discreet, but a beautiful mural adorns the other side of the building, complete with depictions of racial struggles throughout history and hopeful images of the future. Inside, the walls are covered in art depicting black struggle, black visionaries, love and experiences – between numerous fish tanks and bird cages. The resident cat, Ares, greets people from the balcony when she can. A sign in sheet and a mound of bread, free for the taking, greet each person as when they enter the door. Creative Visions strives to create an atmosphere of love, acceptance, and understanding, according to the staff members and to the community who utilize their services. In Creative Visions, food is one of the ways that people within a community care for one another.

Non-profits are central in addressing food-related issues. They utilize numerous methods to improve food access for many people across the country and across the world. In Des Moines and beyond, non-profits fulfill the role of food pantry, meal service, SNAP benefit advice, legal help, land access for food production, and much more. Creative Visions views food as a method of community development. They are a place-based organization focused on uplifting and empowering the community in which the organization is situated. They aim to improve community food security and the community food system through conventional (pantry, meal service, and food rescue) and alternative (community gardens,
Creative Visions & Community Development

Community development has been conceptualized in many different ways. Green and Haines (2008) explain that simply the concept of community is ever changing. Human ecology “defines community as the structure of relationships through which a localized population meets its daily requirements (Matarrita-Cascante & Brennan, 2012, p. 294). From a systems theory, community is an organized set of relationships in which people have roles and interact with one another. Matarrita-Cascante and Brennan (2012) use these two approaches to define community as: “a locality comprised by people residing in a geographical area; the resources such people require to subsist and progress; and the processes in which such individuals engage to distribute and exchange such resources to fulfill local needs and wants” (p. 295). This conception of “community” includes food and the interactions among people pertaining to food.

Community development, is “a process that provides vision, planning, direction, and coordinated action towards desired goals associated with the promotion of efforts aimed at improving the conditions in which local resources operate” (Matarrita-Cascante & Brennan, 2012, p. 297). Community development involves utilizing resources to work toward a goal of improving the community in some way. Creative Visions works to improve the community by using resources – including food resources – to create opportunities for community members. They utilize a people-oriented approach to develop physical, social, and economic improvements. Creative Visions’ mission embodies the concept of community development:
“to break the chain of poverty and hopelessness within vulnerable communities by empowering the individuals within them to become prosperous and productive citizens who contribute to and shape prosperous and productive communities” (Creative Visions, 2019). They use food as a community development tool by providing food resources to community members.

**Methods**

To understand the framework with which Creative Visions views food and food access, I need to understand what food means to both the organization and to the individuals who run it. I interviewed six staff members at Creative Visions to gain an understanding of how the non-profit views itself and how food fits into their larger mission. I asked what food means to the individuals as well as to the organization. These interviews took place at Creative Visions in a relaxed, friendly manner. I had spent time building relationships with Creative Visions staff and we had become familiar with one another in that time. Interview topics included the meaning of food to individuals and to Creative Visions; the role Creative Visions plays in the community and in the food system; the role of race in food issues; barriers and opportunities to improve food issues; and personal and organizational visions for Creative Visions’ future in the Des Moines food system.

**Results**

My first question for each interviewee was simple: “what does food mean to you?” This broad question received a broad range of answers. To those I interviewed, food means: nutrients, feeling healthy and having energy; sustenance and fuel for our bodies; care and sharing; livelihood; and quality of life. Food at Creative Visions is a way to help the
community and meet the needs of individuals. Food is the necessary precursor to success and livelihood. “Food is like the thread throughout everything we do. I can’t provide you education if you’re hungry. You don’t want to dance when your stomach is growling,” one staff member remarked. Food is the most fundamental necessity of humanity. Creative Visions programs make food available and, as every interviewee mentioned, allow people to feel more comfortable and focus on providing other resources for themselves or their families.

It is no question that food is vitally important in cognitive performance, physical wellbeing, and emotional and mental strength. Studies have shown that nutrition affects cognitive abilities, concentration, dopamine levels, perception, intuition, reasoning and more (Just, 2014). Being able to provide quality food for oneself and one’s own family boosts self-esteem and reduces stress. As one staff member explained, “an individual has been able to provide for their family. No mother or father wants to sit here feeling that they’re not taking care of their babies. So, all of that helps mold the wrap around services to be able to help families.” People come into Creative Visions embarrassed to ask for help; they feel as if they have failed. Creative Visions staff, though, approach all people with love and care. They recognize that most of us are just a few steps away from being in that exact same position. “Our mission and our vision are to help better our community, so making sure people have food so they’re not hungry and dying of starvation is huge to our mission,” reported one staff member. Food is not only the introduction for many people to Creative Visions and its programming, but an integral part of a healthy, vibrant community. Creative Visions fosters a sense of care among community members. Particularly with food and agriculture programs,
staff report the desire to empower and serve the youth in the community. I interpreted community to mean both the place and people of color.

With nearly all black staff members, Creative Visions employees have a unique perspective on food that is grounded in their identity and cultural experiences. For example, Langston discussed his experiences growing up in the Nation of Islam and its influence on what constitutes ‘good’ food; another staff member relates soul food to their identity as an African American. They also work in a racially and ethnically diverse neighborhood, so many of their clients are people of color. Staff members reported that part of the meaning of food is related to culture and to race. One staff member mentioned being raised in the Nation of Islam. In his view, the Nation of Islam was started to empower black folks and to raise their self-worth after such tragedies as slavery and historic oppression and violence. In the Nation of Islam, pork and certain other foods are not acceptable because they are bad for you. He spoke specifically of slavery and how slaves were given the “trash” parts of pigs to eat while the slave owners ate the better parts. Not eating pork and bottom feeders is an act of defiance against the oppression and violence past and current generations have endured and still endure. Food is religion; food is culture; food is a political statement.

**Food Access**

The community surrounding Creative Visions is visibly different than other regions of Des Moines. The corner store across the street from Creative Visions is called Grace Grocery, its name written in English under a language with different characters entirely. The houses vary in upkeep and tidiness. Down the street about a block, there is a Family Dollar, a hair product store, a health clinic and an international food store. The closest supermarket is quite a distance, but small stores provide niche ethnic food items. The Family Dollar
provides some food items, but they are in small packages. Without a grocery section, the only food available at the Family Dollar is non-perishable and, though it is cheap, the portions are very small. Most buildings are visibly aged, showing a lack of investment in infrastructure within this community.

Along with disinvestment from government bodies, many low-income communities of color have been targeted by various dollar stores. A recent study conducted by the Institute for Local Self-Reliance (ISLR) found “growing evidence that the growth of dollar stores is not merely a byproduct of economic distress. These chains are a cause of it.” (Donahue & Bonestroo, 2019). The organization used spatial analysis to map Dollar General, Dollar Tree, and Family Dollar stores with demographic racial data from the U.S. Census in eight cities across the United States to find an alarming pattern. These stores are concentrated in low-income communities and communities of color. Dollar stores have “made a killing in recent years by expanding into some of the country’s most vulnerable communities: small, rural towns, and urban, predominantly black neighborhoods” (Anzilotti, 2018). Though these stores offer some food products, the choices are limited, and the food is “often more expensive per ounce” (Donahue & Bonestroo, 2019). Cities are beginning to realize the negative impacts of these stores and some are taking action. In other areas, consumer campaigns call for boycotts of the popular and common chains (Misra, 2018; Emmanuel, 2015; Price, 2019). In addition to providing low-quality food items to consumers, these stores outprice grocery stores, forcing leading to closure of places that offer healthier, better food items and more jobs (Misra, 2018).

The authors of the ISLR report draw specific attention to the case in Tulsa, where “more than 50 dollar stores are concentrated in the city’s black neighborhoods to the north,
and largely skirt the whiter areas of the city” (Anzilotti, 2018). A “14-year life expectancy gap between the residents of North Tulsa and South Tulsa” has been well documented (Donahue & Mitchell, 2018). Dollar stores have targeted areas that have experienced historical disinvestment and are making things worse for the most vulnerable populations. Creative Visions staff are aware of the negative consequences these stores have on the population. One staff member said, “I would love to find a way to make the Family Dollars of our communities more responsible for the stuff they have in there, so if you have a food stamp card you can go in and get a couple cans of this or that… You know, I’m glad it’s available in the community but the options, the choices are those that are the most unhealthy for us.” This quote speaks to the necessity of markets, but the poor quality of those markets that currently exist. This staff member continues:

*That dynamic must change. Big chains and corporate America that run the Quick Trips and the Family Dollars, and put them in these communities, I don’t know how we make them more accountable other than don’t go there and hurt them in the pocket. Find a way to get their attention. If you’re going to be in our community, then figure out how you can better serve us by providing us with cost effective or economically feasible food products that we can bring to our family, bring to our table, and that we are not risking our health for. Those dynamics need to change.* - Cynthia, March 2019

Family Dollar and dollar stores “have succeeded in part by capitalizing on a series of powerful economic and social forces – white flight, the recent recession, the so-called “retail
apocalypse”” and community disinvestment that have created the “holes in food access” (Misra, 2018). These stores are a symptom of a larger problem in the United States: social inequity.

**Creative Visions & Food Justice**

Creative Visions has numerous programs that all pertain to community development and wellness, including dance classes, yoga, a free clinic, political events and quilting socials, but their food programs are often the first step in engaging the community in their work. Creative Visions runs a food pantry that people can frequent monthly; they prepare daily meals that anyone can take; they deliver meals to homeless shelters, youth program centers, homeless “cities” outside, and more every Sunday. On average they deliver over 200 meals per week and prepare many more daily meals. Pantry patrons must provide a valid ID and be entered into the computer system, but no other requirements need to be met before they receive pantry services. Patrons simply sign in, tell the pantry advocate how many people are in their family, and receive their box of frozen goods, non-perishables, and more when available. The pantry is does not provide enough food to last an entire month, but it provides a base of nutritious food.

The non-profit gets food from many sources. They receive food items from the Iowa Food Bank and donations from local farmers. In recent years, with the help of Eat Greater Des Moines they were able to start a food rescue program, partnering with local restaurants, event centers, and grocery stores. Once they got through the legal hurdles, Creative Visions was able to take left over food from various places that would otherwise have gone to waste. The overproduction of food is a symptom of the neoliberal ideology and corporate food regime (Holt-Gimenez, 2010) and rescuing this food tries to interrupt this system. As staff
members report, people are going hungry while companies destroy tons of healthy food every
day. One staff member noted an experience with a local grocery store from the recent past;
he walked past the back of the store and noticed boxes full of eggs, milk, hot dogs, juice and
more. He was so shocked this food was near the trash he went into the store and asked an
employee what was going on. The employee told him that food was being thrown away, but
if taken, the police would be called. The Creative Visions staff member went back out,
anyway, and took some of the food that was meant for the landfill and told others to do the
same. He went on to say, “it’s just amazing because so many people could use that food; they
don’t donate it because it’s not worth the hassle and if they gave it away then less people
would buy from their store. It’s just a mess and it shouldn’t be that way.” This exemplifies
the wastefulness of the commoditization of food in the neoliberal framework. When food is a
commodity it is overproduced to ensure it is always available – but only for a price.

Creative Visions also prepares “daily meals” which are comprised of food items
donated from restaurants, event centers, and grocery stores in the region. Part of their food
rescue program, daily meals are free to everyone, every day of the week. If necessary, staff
will even warm up the plate for a person if they do not have anywhere to take the food. In my
experiences working and volunteering in the food pantry, these daily meals are life saving for
some individuals. As one staff member noted, people living in tents, cars, or on the street
often do not have a way to carry, store or prepare food items; daily meals, prepared meals,
are vital in their case.

Every Sunday, Creative Visions staff prepare food and deliver meals to multiple sites
throughout the city. Perhaps most impactful to the staff members, they deliver food to the
tent cities that exist in Des Moines. Homeless camps along the river and near downtown in
which people survive in their tents, even in the dreadful Iowa winters, are regions of radical survival. Creative Visions ensures the food is quality, too: ”you have vegetables, a starch of some sort, carb of some sort, a meat, pastry, that kind of thing, so just a well-rounded, three or four course meal that can be delivered.” When asked about a personal story about food, the founder and CEO cited meal delivery to the tent cities as the most profound:

*I think the most meaningful time, that made me grateful, was when we started dealing with the tent cities downtown, the homeless. We weren’t delivering to them, and one day we were actually taking food to the homeless shelter, and I happened to look over and I saw these tents, and it was ten below zero outside. I went down there and started talking to folks and walking, knocking on tents and introducing myself. I spent about 35 or 40 minutes there and I told them we’ll be back next Sunday, and we’ll bring food. After that I came home, and was able to come into a warm house, heat blasting, and the thing is, as tears ran down my face then I had to deal with the fact that I feel guilty, you know. And then I had to deal with that. I just had to deal with the fact that we have people living like that in one of the wealthiest countries in the world.*

– Ako, March 2019

Creative Visions is a non-profit and working within the neoliberal system and at the same time the CEO and founder is a state representative fighting for changes in state law that address structural inequity. With roots in community activism, leaders from schools and the legislature, and young people of color motivated to make a difference and fulfill the needs of
the community, Creative Visions attempts to interrupt the problems in the food market economy we see today. They provide life-saving meals and a safe place in a turbulent time and place. All people are welcome at Creative Visions, and food is truly meaningful. Serving as a hub of always-available meals, Creative Visions uses food as a means to build a sense of place and community.

**Place**

Place is an important concept in planning and community development. Place helps people define who they are or develop identity (for example, people from Queens often have a different identity than people from Brooklyn, though they are both boroughs of New York City). Place is also important because it makes up a physical area; certain places have or lack certain resources, and thus explain important characteristics of that area and the people within it. “Place includes the physical setting, human activities, and human social and psychological processes rooted in the setting” (Stedman, 2002, p. 562). Place and the organisms in it (humans and more) are in constant flux, imprinting on and altering each other continually. Community development and cohesion rely on a sense of place (Wise, 2015). Place has been found to have an impact on beliefs and attitudes, identity, behavior, health, and more (Wise, 2015). Creative Visions uses food as a means to build this sense of place, of community, and of care. “Food helps build community and identify problems in the community. It helps to build families and bring families together.” Whether it is coming together around a meal or growing food together in garden, food brings people together and creates bonds, according to Creative Visions leaders. This cohesion of people is strengthened by the development of a sense of place and a sense of community.
Place can be defined as a “setting of landscape of profound meaning and connection to an individual by virtue of personal, direct experience” (Delind, 2006, p. 127-128). Place is an important concept in phenomenology. Place, while it is the literal landscape and built environment surrounding a person, also includes people and interactions among all facets. Seamon explains place as “any environmental locus that draws human experiences, actions, and meanings together spiritually” (2013, p. 150). In this regard, a place can be a room, neighborhood, city, or something larger or smaller, but place is not distinct from the people in the defined space. People and places are in constant conversation with one another, changing and creating impacts on one another through existence. With this understanding of place, the concept is very important in planning. Seamon refers to Jane Jacobs’ “place ballet” in his article, or the idealistic community in which people and place cooperate to create a healthy, safe, livable place with a sense of cohesiveness and trust. Place creates who we are and vice versa. Beliefs, values, and practices are shaped by place – including food beliefs, values, and practices. Moisio, Arnould, and Price explain, “food meaning and practices embody social structure and relationships and fluctuate with local economic and social contexts” (2004, p. 362).

People who live in proximity to one another often share additional traits. Often, neighborhoods are demographically similar; neighbors have similar incomes and, often, similar skin color or ethnicity. Neighborhoods and communities present certain characteristics. Residential segregation occurs because of class as well as race (Dwyer, 2010): “the links between poverty, prosperity, and place were therefore crucially shaped by race as well as economic disparities in the age of extremes” (Dwyer, 2010, abstract). Place, as we understand it, pertains to the environment as well as the people within the area. As
segregation is well documented, the race, diversity, class, prosperity, and opportunity of those in place are very relevant. It is more likely that residents in a certain place will have more in common with one another than with someone who lives two neighborhoods over. Place and the people within it perpetuate these differences and similarities – within the context of wide social and political inequity.

Prinsen, Ridder, and Vet (2013) completed a study about how the food environment or landscape affects food choice. Using simple observation and small environmental cues, these researchers found that participants were much more likely to choose a bakery item that seemed to have been chosen more by others. The researchers used a bowl of chocolates and different numbers of empty wrappers to indicate their popularity, changing the number for different customers. They found that with more wrappers, people are more likely to take a chocolate. Likewise, when given the choice between a healthy and unhealthy snack, the perceived popularity of the snack impacted people’s choice. This study demonstrates the importance of environmental cues, even subtle ones like presence of wrappers, in influencing food choice. Subtle clues “act as a social proof heuristic” for people, providing guidance as to what is socially more or less acceptable in certain situations (p. 2). While this study does not address the problem of lack of choice that many people living with food insecurity experience, it does indicate that small changes have the potential to make a difference in food habits, when choice is present.

Heynen et al. (2012) point to the absence of supermarkets and proliferation of fast/convenience food as a health risk in urban areas (p. 305). Lack of access to healthy and affordable foods has been tied to a number of health problems, both with overeating and undereating. Heynen and colleagues do not, however, argue for incentivizing chain grocery
stores to enter these urban areas. They argue that “urban hunger is understood to be a direct
effect on the commodification of food, structural inequities produced through urban planning
and zoning and the inequitable distribution of wealth” (p. 306-207). They assert that food
security problems result from societal and political systems. Urban planning and zoning
dictate where food can be grown and sold, as well as where people can live. The
commodification of food has led to a disconnect between food, the producer, and the
consumer (Lyson, 2004); a physical distance between people and food processes. Healthy
and fresh food have been removed from some urban environments, changing the possibilities
of interacting with food. Considering the phenomenological perspective on place, this lack of
proximity changes what food means for people. Heynen, Kurtz, and Trauger argue for a
focus on community food security and urban agriculture in food justice initiatives because
they create food spaces in place and have been shown to have real potential in true food
justice.

Related to the planning and zoning assertion from Heynan and colleagues, Munoz-
Plaza and Morland (2007) explain that the built environment affects food options. In
interviewing people in low-income neighborhoods, these researchers reported many
problems that can be linked to the built environment. Poor food quality is common because
of a lack of markets with healthy, fresh food. Even when healthy food is found, it is so
expensive many cannot afford it. Cost of food is the most often reported important factor in
food choice (Alkon, et al., 2013) for low-income individuals. Residents also reported few
food options, limited transportation to and from food places, and mistrust in the food
pursuors. People reportedly felt forced to shop outside their neighborhood in order to obtain
quality foods, which creates added stress and time constraints. This study exemplifies the
importance of food in place. Residents need access to safe, healthy food at affordable prices in proximity to their home.

Fonte (2008) pays attention to place and the potential of local food to celebrate and reinvigorate culture in a region. She argues, like Heynen et al., that the commodification of food and the separation of food from particular places has created “placeless foodscape[s]” and food can be used to revitalize communities (p. 202-203). Fonte argues that ‘local’ (like place) incorporates history, tradition, space and more complex characteristics, and that agriculture in place is vital to society. Delind (2006) agrees, saying that rather than obtaining food from large markets and huge distances, becoming physically engaged with food and agriculture will result in a better world (p. 143). Through local food ventures, “collective institutions are generated and networked, territorial links are strengthened and reflexivity over local identity is stimulated” (Fonte, p. 209). Delind’s inclusion of contextualization and attention to wider societal problems is important, though, as local agriculture requires time and energy commitments that are not possible for many working people today.

Finally, in the physical community or environment, food and food structures play an important role in community development and feelings of cohesion. Restaurants and bars serve as community centers where bonds are created and social ties are strengthened (Bell & Valentine, 1997). Television shows depict such examples; Cheers centers on a community bar in which friends and strangers coalesce; Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt jokes about the high social status of kids who hang out at the Olive Garden; Friends’ Central Perk coffee shop provides one of the most often seen sets in the iconic New York sitcom. Though media may not reflect real life situations accurately, it is true that communities, families, and other
groups tend to frequent the same restaurants and bars. These locations are important in developing a sense of place and cohesion (Wise, 2015).

**The Limitations of Gardens**

Creative Visions is associated with two community gardens, one on the side of the building with raised beds and one across the street that has plots for families. The raised beds are cared for by a staff member’s wife and other volunteers. The garden across the street was developed in partnership with Global Greens, a program within the non-profit Lutheran Services of Iowa that “reconnects former refugee farmers with the land as they build their new life in the U.S.” (Global Greens, 2017). As such, this community garden is designated for specific families rather than designated for the community as a whole. Families walk or drive to this garden and grow food for themselves and sometimes to sell. Creative Visions staff expressed deep interest in developing deeper community roots in this local agricultural venture. The staff member who leads the community garden initiative specifically spoke about the need to foster a sense of connection to the land and to agriculture among black individuals and families in the community. During a thank you speech after receiving an award for excellent woman community leadership, she mentioned people of color’s roots in agriculture and the importance of food, health, and the environment in people’s lives. When I asked the CEO about his vision for food at Creative Visions and in the community, he painted an idealistic picture of neighborhood cohesion and multi-purpose, empowering changes:

*I would like to see us get in a position of being able to own some property, to purchase some property to set up a hydroponic or aquaponic system so people*
in the neighborhood can come see technology and urban farming happen. To have a community aquaponics where we can actually give fresh fish, we talk about food and were talking about working with these other issues. We talk about food and then we talk about including STEM programs so students can learn technology. I would love to have a whole block and build a system that has a restaurant in it, it would provide employment. You could make it environmentally friendly. That’s the future. We could take another step and build two story apartments, low-income apartments on the stores, and the third story could be aquaponics. It would make people proud of where they live. – Ako, March 2019

It is hard not to get swept away in the romanticism of a closed system like the one Creative Visions has in mind for the future: a location that not only feeds, but also houses, teaches, and employs people in the community. As powerful as such an organization would be in the lives of its participants, it is not enough to change the structure that created their exclusion to begin with. As Alkon (2014) points out, a shift in market demand and a supportive network does not get to the root of the problem. It is necessary to address the food system at large, the hegemonic structures that created inequity in the food system, to create sustainable change (Alkon & Agyeman, 2011; Broad, 2016). Placing the responsibility on non-profits and aid organizations removes the responsibility from the state to provide for its people. What “was once considered the province of the state” is now seen as another group’s responsibility (p. 30). This framework for action is market-oriented and places the responsibility on the individual or community to provide its own food resources.
This framework also, Alkon suggests, limits the possibilities of what can be accomplished in alternative food movements by framing citizens as merely cogs of the capitalist market machine (2014, p. 30). She outlines three strategies that “resist the primacy of the capitalist market” however: cooperative ownership, food workers’ movements, and policy campaigns (p. 11). These strategies enroll methods that put the economic and political power in the hands of community members and confront the conventional food system. Though they are limited in the scope at which they can succeed to varying degrees, each of these strategies requires attention to racial and gender issues and maintain a justice-oriented goal. Perhaps, if these methods are employed, the future Creative Visions wants can help to confront the systemic inequity in the food system.

Creative Visions places food within a framework of care and a true passion for creating positive change in the community. In interviewing the leaders and staff, I saw how much each person cares about the mission and vision of the organization and how much they believe in their leadership. One staff member explained, “I see Ako when people come in. When people come in, they know this is a good spot. My experience here, it’s just a whole new culture. It’s like they – it’s like we are a family here.” Fostering a culture of compassion in the organization is an act of defiance in a neighborhood that has been deemed violent and unsafe. Creative Visions provides a safe place with strong, black leaders and passionate staff members. Their involvement in both the political sphere and in community activism place them in a strong position to exact change in the food system and broader socioeconomic inequities. Leaders talked about the economic and racial inequity on more than one occasion:
“We’ve had people come across these doors for a food pantry in tears because they’ve never had to do that before. Because of losing a job, people and businesses cutting back and this whole minimum wage thing! I’d love to see some politician who votes against raising the minimum wage – raise your family on $7.25 an hour. Do it! Do it! I challenge you.” –Cynthia, March 2019

“We have our disparities. I see [food] as a “have” and “have not” at this point. Most individuals that live in Communities of Color can’t afford Campbell’s and health food restaurants. They’re outpriced. They can’t go into the organic section of Hy-Vee.” And even if they did, “The Hy-Vee on Martin Luther King Drive [doesn’t have] fresh meat. They don’t have a fresh meat counter. I can’t get fresh fish from the Hy-Vee on Martin Luther King.” –Ako, March 2019

“Not having food can go hand in hand with not having housing. Some of our clients or people who come to the pantry live in a car, so they can’t take cold items because it’s getting warm outside. Or they don’t have a can opener, so there’s no way they can open things. It breaks my heart. There’s nowhere to shower, nowhere to cook, nowhere to sleep.” –Laura, March 2019
During our conversation, Cynthia, the Program Manager of Creative Visions, explained the principles of Kwanzaa and how they fit into the development of a better food system:

*Umoja* – unity; *kujichagulina* – self-determination; *ujima* – collective work and responsibility; *ujamaa* – collective economics; *nia* – purpose; and *kuumba* – creativity; the last one is faith [Imani]. All seven days, all seven principles can be put right on the table with [food justice]. There are creative ways, *kuumba*, creative ways to do this. Purpose, *nia*, for the purpose of making sure we have food in our communities, and it is sustainable and paying attention to the health and wellbeing of our community. All seven of those principles can fit right there. We can do this, we can do this.” March, 2019

Though the principles of Kwanzaa are empowering and important for people in the community, they alone do not address the broader social inequities necessary to combat injustice. It is important to feel powerful, but it is also important to recognize the implicit behaviors and actions behind the problems the community faces with food and other socioeconomic issues. The love and compassion present in Creative Visions work are radical in themselves, defying the marketization of food, but not escaping it. Food rescue and pantry food still come from a food assistance system that mirrors the commoditization of food and the inequitable system it which it is entrenched. Approaches such as cooperative ownership, political campaigns, and community-oriented food justice initiatives provide people with the
economic control and freedom from exploitation present in the conventional food system. With a vision for food justice that includes affordable housing, land access, and community empowerment, Creative Visions has high hopes and aspirations; by employing these methods, they hope to create lasting change in the neighborhood.

The leaders of Creative Visions are well aware of the inequity in the food system. They work within the system as well as outside of it in order to create positive change. Within the system, Ako works as a state representative to pass policies that address inequity. Outside the system, Creative Visions organizes community events and works to increase prosperity for individuals and the community in which it is situated. Managing a community garden and hosting educational and community events create a movement outside the typical avenues of change. Insurgent methods may be utilized to create change where the neoliberal system has not created space for change (Miraftab, 2009). Insurgency “recognizes, supports and promotes not only the comping mechanism of the grassroots exercised in invited spaces of citizenship, but also the oppositional practices of the grassroots as they innovate their own terms of engagement” (Miraftab, 2009, p. 41). Insurgency invites grassroots initiatives that confront the hegemony and the neoliberal power structure that acts to subdue or subordinate groups. By utilizing methods that are both within the neoliberal system and methods that confront it, Creative Visions works to transform the conventional food system in creative ways.

**Conclusion**

Creative Visions works to create community development through food. The staff members see the organization as a resource for struggling community members. All interviewees reported feeling that Creative Visions as a hub of acceptance and care, even
more so than surrounding pantries, with a goal of providing the basic means to people so they can excel economically and take care of their loved ones without worry. Food, according to the staff of Creative Visions, is an integral part of – a first step toward – prosperity. By working within the political system and conventional food system as well as outside of both, they employ creative methods with which to confront the inequity in the food system of Des Moines.

By providing food to residents in need, Creative Visions creates a safety net intended to allow people to focus on economic prosperity. The interviews provided by staff members revealed the importance of food as a necessary component of community development because of its role as a primary, every day need for individuals. Creative Visions embodies the principles of community development by maintaining a clear vision and direction for the community which includes improving the lives of those within the community. They utilize their resources to best serve the community. The mission, vision, and programming of Creative Visions reflect a desire to improve the lives of people community-wide.

Creative Visions exemplifies the desires of community-based organizations working to address food issues and implement community development. With limited resources, however, its impacts are also limited. Though the organization exemplifies inspired goals for the future, the feasibility of such changes are unclear without systemic change. The goals of this non-profit align with its role as a “shadow state” organization, fulfilling the needs of vulnerable or marginalized populations and working to create a more equitable city.
CHAPTER 7. FOOD AS LIVED EXPERIENCE: PHOTOVOICE

“The human relationship to food obviously is a complex one.” (Fischler, 1988, p. 275)

Understanding the lived experiences of individuals in Des Moines is an important component of a complete food justice perspective. Food is in integral part of individual and group identity, culture, health, relationships, and status. People value different aspects of food; for some, it is an expression of their heritage or family legacy. For others, finding and consuming healthy food is a challenge. Food is also a method of showing love and care; people cook meals for their loved ones, expressing their commitment through time and nourishment. A person’s relationship to food is omnipresent in their life. Food is part of every person’s everyday experience, and it is deeply connected to who we are.

Lived experiences reveal what is happening to real people while the network analysis and organizational analysis explain how things pertaining to food are happening. Without considering lived experiences, we cannot fully address or understand the issues or identify solutions to the food system of Des Moines. High school students from Des Moines provide their perspective of food through art and a community gallery show. These perspectives, or the stories these individuals tell, provide “an avenue through which we can understand social action and knowledge practices” (Broad, 2016, p. 29). Stories and art provide a different way to describe and understand the world around us. Youth, in particular, provide a unique perspective because of their lack of economic responsibility and somewhat limited awareness of food issues. As they are not part of the political system the same way adults are, youth provide a uniquely insurgent potential for intervention as well. This chapter explores the lived experiences of six Des Moines youth through their photography and conversations.
“Every food is invested with meaning” (Moore, 1957, p. 82). “Eating, sleeping, demonstrating love and affection” are some of the areas we confront the “nonrationality and the complexity of symbolic elaborations on physiologic patterns,” (Moore, 1957, p. 77). Food is embedded in social, economic and political structures (Bell & Valentine, 1997; Halkier, 2013; Heynan, Kurtz, & Trauger, 2012; Johnson, Steeves, Gewanter & Gittelsohn, 2017; Jackson & Viehoff, 2016; Madrigal, 2014; Munoz-Plaza & Morland, 2007; Parsons, 2015; Popkin, Duffey & Gordon-Larsen, 2005; Rozin, 1996). In this way, food practices are a proxy for culture and identity. Food practices can reveal important information about identity, relationships with family, friends, and institutions, health, and socio-economic standing (Heynen, et al., 2012; Parsons, 2015; Rozin, 1996; Stehr & Adolf, 2010).

Examining the meaning of food can explain problems that exist in the social, economic and political structures. Additionally, it can reveal structural problems “exacerbated by racial, ethnic, gender, class and age disparities” (Heynan, et al., 2012, p. 305).

**Photovoice**

The phenomenological perspective, much aligned with the PAR/photovoice methodology, “is the description and interpretation of human experience” (Seamon, 2013, p. 143). It recognizes that the world is shaped and interpreted by humans, finding that meaning comes from the human experience. Using his own terminology, Seamon (2013) explains that phenomenology asserts that meaning is “shaped and sustained, totally or in part, by the collective lifeworlds comprising them” (p. 145). A lifeworld, as Seamon explains, is “the typical, taken-for-granted context of everyday experience” of which we are usually unaware (p. 143). In other words, the world is meaningful and that meaning comes from the amalgamation of meanings persons ascribe to the world through their experiences. Meaning
can be altered by social networks, personal experiences, and the context of the world surrounding us (Seamon, 2013). This perspective is useful in understanding individual perspectives on food, as they are deeply engrained and integrated in daily life as well as human systems that span humanity, ecology, the built environment and all aspects of the world. The phenomenological perspective makes sense of the complexity of food and the meaning of food for individuals.

Food has meanings tied to health and the space bodies take up in the world. This perspective seeks to understand food as people experience it in their everyday lived experience. It additionally has meanings tied to care and relationships, identity and culture, and space and place (Delind, 2006; Fischler, 1988; Julier, 2013; Kaplan, 1999; Moisio, et al., 2004; Moore, 1957; Rozin, 2005; Seamon, 2013; Stehr 7 Adolf, 2010).

Food as care is often studied in the context of family. Traditional American culture has created a culture around family dinner and its importance. Traditional structures centered around food and family also reinforce gender roles and patriarchal values (Bell & Valentine, 1997; Kaplan, 1999, Moisio, et al., 2004). Alternatively, feminist geography has examined an ethic of care in agriculture and food in a different way. For example, Jarosz (2011) explained that a feminist care of ethics, employed by a group of women farmers in a metropolitan area, “contributes to feminist political ecology by focusing upon the social relations of caring practice” (abstract). Not only is care a framework for interacting with others in feminist geography, but also in self-care. In this perspective, care is a form of insurgency; it is a grassroots or personal “liberatory transformation of self” that confronts hegemonic capitalist politics and frameworks (Jarosz, 2011).
On the individual level, food studies indicate that food is a way for a person to express their identity, whether that is racial or ethnic culture, morals and beliefs, religion, or even personality (Fischler, 1988, Parsons, 2015; Rozin, 2005). People who identify as a certain religion may abstain from certain foods; those from certain areas of the world may desire particular spices or food items that others do not.

Finally, spatial contexts impact the availability of certain kinds of food, the culture we are engrained within, and the people we associate with. Our surroundings, or what I will call place, is comprised of not only the built or physical features but also the people (Seamon, 2013). Place and its components have massive effects on the food we eat and the values we develop (Delind, 2006; Fonte, 2008; Munoz-Plaza & Morland, 2007; Moisio et al., 2004; Prinser & Ridder, 2013). In order to address any issues in the food system at any level, consideration of lived experiences as well as the political, cultural and social systems must be included. (Heynan et al., 2012).

Photovoice allows participants to use art and their own narratives to explain their lived experiences. Understanding this lived experience grounds my research in real-life events and allows me to understand how and where radical food movements occur in on a personal level in Des Moines and in the Creative Visions neighborhood. Speaking with youth provides a unique perspective. Youth absorb different influences than adults do. Their perspective provides information on institutions such as schools, families, community programs, and social dynamics that others do not. Additionally, youth are in a unique position in terms of food attainment and consumption. They do not always make their own choices about food and they do not make their own money to buy their own food. One major impediment I faced in working with high school students (freshmen, sophomores and juniors
from Roosevelt High School) was their lack of autonomy when it comes to allocation of their own time. It was difficult to get all students in a room together for the first meeting or focus group. Once together, the participants were talkative and open about their food perspectives and beliefs, allowing me to understand their world in a way.

The photovoice study involved three conversations: first, a focus group with all participants; next, a one-on-one or two-on-one interview between one or two of the participants and me; then, one (planned) final meeting with all students. Ideally, all participants would be able to make it to the final art show after the meetings, but neither the third meeting with all participants or full attendance at the art show were possible. Participants had to take care of school responsibilities, club responsibilities, and family responsibilities suddenly and unexpectedly, forcing me to reschedule many of the one-on-one meetings. The day of the art show, one participant had to take care of her siblings; one had a school function; one had family events and the other three were able to attend. Working within the school system may have been more successful, as students are guaranteed to be in a specific place for a specific time in this case.

One unique trait of working with youth is their perspective of events. For example, two of the participants discussed having to cook for an event their family and community was involved in, but they were not aware of what the event was. When I asked them about where they get their food, they did not know the names of grocery stores, only that they would recognize them and know which ones had which food items. Their limited knowledge of the food system provides an interesting amount of data for analysis.

Each participant gave permission to use their names in my publications, but I will only be using first names. Joyce and Patience are high school sophomores who live down the
street from Creative Visions. Joyce arrived in the United States at 3 months old from Cote d’Ivoire, and Patience arrived at 3 years old from the same country. Tsheten came from Southeast Asian when she was 3 years old, and lives farther from Creative Visions but still in the surrounding neighborhoods. Ikra, who identifies as East African because her family, originally from Somalia, spent years in Kenya before immigrating to Des Moines, lives a few blocks from Creative Visions. Two of Langston’s brothers attended the first meeting as well but did not continue the project after the initial focus group. Zach and Mary Ann, juniors, live near one another but in a different area of Des Moines than the rest. Zach and Mary Ann are the only white participants in the study. Each person provided a unique perspective on food. Culture, health and care were the most fundamental themes identified by the participants.

**Talking About Food**

Each conversation occurred at Creative Visions in a conference room or in the main room. The location was dependent on availability; Creative Visions hosts numerous programs with dynamic schedules, so the conference room was sometimes booked for other events or groups. The location of the conversations likely affected the conversation to some extent; “our actions and words might not be determined by the places in which they occur, but they are certainly influenced by them” (Beauregard, 2016, p. 284). Holding conversations in a place that provides food assistance through pantry and meal service likely brought food security to the forefront of the participants’ minds more than if we met at a different location. Conversations in the conference room were much more private than conversations in the main room; participants may have felt they could speak more freely in the conference room.
We had our first group conversation in the conference room at Creative Visions. I had met with the participants prior to this conversation but Langston had not. I arrived early with snack foods, both healthy and unhealthy, and ordered a pizza. The students arrived in pairs or alone. Langston brought his two younger brothers (who participated in the first conversation but quit the project after it). Once everyone was settled around the conference table and the recording devices were in place, I introduced the project briefly again and had Langston introduce himself as my partner. After going over the consent forms, image release forms, copyright forms and camera basics, we jumped into a discussion about food. Rather than starting with a generic ice breaker, I brought a large poster board and asked everyone to – while getting food and snacks – write or draw on the poster board something that explains what food means to them. I asked Langston to then go through the words and illustrations with the group. This way, he was involved in the conversation to a larger extent. We took turns responding and asking follow-up questions of the participants when they explained their answers.

Participants immediately identified most of the major themes I had researched pertaining to food studies. Joyce and Tsheten both wrote “culture” and Joyce drew the Cote d’Ivoire flag, revealing how important her ethnicity and culture are to her. Mary Ann drew two people sitting at a table, sharing a meal, with a heart over their heads. She explained that it was supposed to be a family, but she ran out of room to draw more people. Others remarked that it looked like a date: both possibilities represent the importance of food in creating bonds and social interactions.

Zach immediately wrote the word “smiles” and Mary Ann drew a smile line underneath his word. Zach strongly correlates food with happiness, his relationship with
Mary Ann, and his relationship with his mother and father. Langston’s brothers wrote words such as energy, sustenance, and fuel; their perspective on food seems to be more closely tied to health than to relationships. Tsheten and Patience both mentioned memories as an important aspect of food. Tsheten said, “for example when you’re having food with family, and it’s really good, you remember next time the time you spent with them.” Family appeared early in the meeting to be an important theme for these youth. As Mary Ann explained, “Well I mean food means love. Parents feed you a lot of food because they love you. They’re always like “eat more!””

I asked if anyone had to help with cooking and every person at the table raised their hand. Joyce said, “sometimes my mom tells me, you’re cooking tomorrow,” and Tsheten said, “I cook for myself and my sister.” As Kaplan (1999) suggested, food preparation is a way not only for parents to show love and care for their children, but also for children to show love and care for their parents and siblings.

Two participants wrote “vegetarian” on the poster board. Tsheten and Ikra talked about a speaker that came to their high school. The speaker presented facts about the animal agriculture system and they inspired Tsheten and Ikra to try vegetarianism. When asked, Ikra explained: “why am I vegetarian? I was thinking about it a long time, I always thought about it and I remember we had a speaker and she said she wasn’t trying to push it on us but everything she was saying was like making sense. She was on this like how they kill eight million animals per hour for food.” High school students are at a point in their lives when they are determining and exerting their autonomy, developing their individual identity that is often unique from their family members. Vegetarianism is an example of individual identity assertion (Bell & Valentine, 1997).
Other people wrote particular food items down: Mary Ann wrote and drew “spaghetti”; Ivin (Langston’s brother) wrote “watermelon”; and Langston himself wrote “bean pie”. It is worth noting that, eventually, Mary Ann would produce a photo of spaghetti for this project. Mary Ann explained the significance of spaghetti at the first conversation, but it turned out to be even more meaningful by the end. She explained, “I’m a swimmer, I need a lot of carbs, so we always have spaghetti meals or lasagna the night before a big athletic event.” This is an example of a ritual or culture that revolves around food. Mary Ann’s identity as a swimmer and as a team member are strengthened by the food culture. Langston’s reason for writing bean pie is cultural as well. Langston explained:

_I was raised in the Nation of Islam and there are a lot of health things. So, one of the healthiest things is the navy bean. It has the most nutrients and if you get the right ones, they hold more nutrients than other beans. They’ve made it into a bean pie. And it’s not a bean pie like you think, it’s like... have you ever had sweet potato pie? Same thing, you blend up the beans and you can’t even tell they’re in it._

Langston’s upbringing, faith, and family environment influence his food choices and perceptions. On the contrary, Tsheten did mention the ability of food to bring people from different cultures together. “I think [food] also brings people together like from different cultures. For example, in my country I never tried pizzas, burgers, anything like that. But when I came here, I knew about it and wanted to know more about it and also, I never knew
they had noodles and everything here. Now I know everything is here. That’s really cool for me,” Tsheten explained.

When asked about school food, nearly everyone at the conference table groaned. Joyce said, “in the schools the food is so bad,” and Tsheten continued, “it’s not even healthy.” Ikra, Iain, Ivin and Langston then went on to discuss the lack of culturally appropriate foods in school. The three participants and Langston all have experience with the Nation of Islam, so cannot eat certain foods. They expressed frustration that, on certain lunch meal days, they had to eat a peanut butter and jelly sandwich instead of the hot, cooked meal other students received. The school’s lack of culturally appropriate foods made these individuals feel like outsiders within the institution.

Photo 7-1 shows the poster board from this session, though it gained some illustrations during the next conversations.
For our next conversations, Langston was not able to be present. I met with participants alone or in pairs; Zach and Mary Ann came together and Patience and Joyce came together; Tsheten and I conversed one-on-one, just as Ikra and I did. I met with Joyce and Patience three times total. The first time we met, they were unaware they were supposed to bring in their photos. Because I brought food items to each meeting, we had a conversation about food while they ate and Joyce drew on the poster. Even without their photos, it was clear to see how important cultural foods are to these two Cote d’Ivoire immigrants. After choosing food, Patience asked Joyce, “can you draw attieke? ‘Cause that’s what I had today. As soon as I was done, I was like, I should have taken a picture. I forgot! It was so pretty. I don’t know what it’s made of though. It looks like rice, but it isn’t.” They explained that you eat attieke with avocados, green peppers, onions, fish, pepper, anything. They went on to tell me about how they met – their parents had known each other for a few years, but the two close friends had only met within the year. They explained that it seems easier to make friends with people who share your ethnicity or culture.

Joyce and Patience spoke the most about helping their families and community with cooking. I asked about one instance:

Me: “Did you say you had to cook on Saturday?”

Patience: “Yeah, and we didn’t take a picture of it either. We made so much stuff and we still didn’t take a picture.”

Me: “What did you make, and why?”

Patience: “It was a freakin’ convention going on. We cooked at her house, but we cooked to take it to the place. It was so much chicken! We cooked so much chicken my fingers was hurting.”
Joyce: “[laughs] Your fingers was hurting ‘cause I didn’t cut any.”

Patience: “And we had to put it in this huge pot, take it to my house, put it on my stove, fried it at my house and then cooked the beans.”

This interaction points to an insurgent food landscape, at least for the people associated with Joyce and Patience and their families. Communal cooking and gathering over large amounts of food can be a method of confronting the neoliberal food system, as it is based in a sense of community rather than a sense of commoditization. Though they did not have extensive knowledge about the event, or even why they were cooking, they were a part of an organized effort to feed a large group of people. These events tend to build community and trust among people (Julier, 2013).

Joyce and Patience also explained the ethnic store landscape of the area. I asked if they shop at Grace Grocery because it is across the street from Creative Visions. They said they go there for emergency supplies at times, but the woman who runs the store is from a different part of Africa than they are, so she has different supplies. Joyce and Patience did not know the names of the ethnic stores in the region, only that their mothers took them there; the ethnic stores they and their family frequent are reportedly hard to find. They implied that in order to find the stores, you must know someone who knows where they are already.

The next day, I met with Joyce and Patience again, this time with their photos of food. We went through Patience’s photos first; she showed me a picture of a slushie, her mother’s nearly empty soup bowl, meat stored in the freezer and more. Patience had a somewhat difficult time finding the words to explain the foods she was showing me. She asked Joyce to translate food items throughout the conversation. Next, we went through Joyce’s photos. She talked about her cousin’s culinary talents and showed pictures of staged
meals. Joyce also showed photos of home cooked meals and cultural meals. I asked Joyce and Patience to write down narratives for the photos they wanted to include in the art show. This gave them the opportunity to explain their photos and the importance of the photos without fear of judgement. Photos 7-2 - 7-7 were taken by Joyce and Patience.

**Photo 7-2: Puff Puffs**

Joyce

Narrative: Our moms make these. This is supposed to be called puff balls or puff puff. It’s just dough. They use yeast, flour, and water and sometimes they use sugar. They’ll let it rise before they take it, and it’s really sticky. They grab it and shape it and put it in oil.

**Photo 7-3: Ice Cream**

Joyce

Narrative: I love ice cream and chocolate, so I got some with whipped cream when I went to the mall. I couldn’t resist! I love ice cream.
Photo 7-4: Rice, Beans and Spice
Joyce

Narrative: This is rice with beans and a spicy gravy to go with it. On the side, fried plantains and fish –and some lettuce for color. My cousin made this, too, but I added the lettuce.

Photo 7-5: Cassava Leaf Soup
Joyce

Narrative: This is cassava leaf soup. It has crabs, chicken and more meat in it. There’s cassava like the root that people cook and then there’s the leaf. This is from the leaf.
Narrative: My mom made peanut butter soup with Fu Fu and I took a picture because it looked nice. Fu Fu is sometimes made of cassava, the roots, sometimes plantain. It comes in a powder and you put it in water. We use our hands, and you mix it up with your hands and it gets big. Warm it up, and you eat it with soup.

Narrative: This is peanut butter soup before I put it in my bowl. It has turkey, chicken, shrimp, fish, and that’s chicken feet. They add a lot of flavor. It’s good, it’s my friend’s favorite. It’s in almost every soup.
Mary Ann and Zach came in together to have a conversation about the photos they took. Mary Ann had traveled to Colorado for a family trip for the majority of the time she was assigned to take photos, and Zach reportedly read books and stayed home while she was gone. These two participants were very close. In our discussion, they made it very clear they spend a lot of time together and care deeply for one another. We went through Mary Ann’s photos first. Most of her photos centered on large, extended family meals. While she was in Colorado, Mary Ann and her mother also traveled to some colleges to visit; Mary Ann and Zach are juniors in high school. On their trips together, Mary Ann and her mother ate meals together. Even when they are in Iowa, they eat and travel together: “I travel with my mom for swim meets. That’s usually just me and my mom so we would go out to eat somewhere. Maid-Rite. We always have our tradition of going to Maid-Rite in Marshalltown. Mother-daughter type dates.”

Mary Ann deeply focused on familial relationship and their importance in food and mealtime. One of her photos (Photo 8) depicts her grandmother’s arm during a family meal. Mary Ann spoke fondly of her grandmother and of her entire family’s care for her during mealtime. She went on to explain that, during large family meals, her aunts and cousins always bring photo albums and their phones to show pictures and catch up on each other’s life events. “My cousin, she’s really curious, so whenever she cleans stuff and finds treasures, she digs them out. She brought the photo albums.” Mary Ann discussed the conversation and care that surrounds the dinner table during large family meals.

Zach presented three photos with a common theme: smiles. He expressed his concern for Mary Ann by explaining his care packages for her (in case she feels ill) and trying to make her smile with food. For all three of his photos, Zach mentioned health. His photos did
not depict foods that are *extremely* healthy, but typical lunch or snack foods. Zach did reminisce about his father making “sprinkle toast” for him when he was younger, and about asking his mother for a snack before running back outside to climb trees as a child. He related food to family, relationships, and health. **Photos 7-8 – 7-13** are Mary Ann and Zach’s photos.

Mary Ann

Narrative: My grandma really likes displaying the food. She has arthritis now so it’s hard for her to hold the utensils, but she always tries to eat as elegantly as possible. She’s the slowest eater so she’s the one who, we wait 20 minutes after everyone else is done eating and she’s still eating. It’s fun!

**Photo 7-8: Slow Eater**

Mary Ann

Narrative: Spaghetti is kind of messy and just kind of flops. It’s a whirlwind because it’s messy just like dinner conversation. You just kind of flow around topics and if it stops, you just kind of pick up wherever.

**Photo 7-9: A Whirlwind of a Dinner**
Mary Ann

Narrative: This is at the end of the meal right before we start cleaning up. Since my grandma is always the last to finish, is while she is talking we stack up the plates and get all the trash together but try not to pressure her. That way as soon as she’s done, we all are.

Photo 7-10: A Meal Well Done

Zach

Narrative: This is a PB & J split in half. The raisins are the pupils, there’s half a Triscuit for the nose, and green grapes for the smile. You can’t go wrong with PB & J. It’s the type of food that a kid who’s busy playing outside would eat. Like if you play outside climbing trees, you run inside for a minute and ask your mom to make food, that’s what she’ll make and you’ll go back outside. And grapes. It’s fruit, it’s nature, green, chlorophyll, healthy.

Photo 7-11: Healthy, Happy

Zach

Narrative: This is a pair of saltines I drew on. They’re supposed to be hugging. Whenever I get sick or I’m not feeling good, my mom would always suggest I eat some crackers. Same with Mary Ann. I make her care packages and I’ll throw in saltines just in case she’s not feeling good and she wants something light.

Photo 7-12: Easy Care and Healing
Zach

Narrative: It’s a piece of what we call sprinkle toast. It’s just cinnamon sugar on some buttered toast. I always make Mary Ann sprinkle toast, so it’s important to me because it always makes her smile and it tastes good. And when I was little, my dad would always make this for me. I’d fold it in half, I know it sounds kind of barbaric, but he would make it for me, and I’d eat it like a half sandwich.

Photo 7-13: Sprinkle Toast

Ikra and I met one-on-one for our next conversation. She also traveled for the time she was assigned to take photos. She and her family went to Minneapolis/St. Paul and were able to find East African restaurants in the cities. Ikra explained to me that her family is originally from Somalia, but her parents spent years in Kenya before she was born, then moved to Des Moines. She identifies as East African. Ikra was much quieter than the other participants, but she did talk about the importance of eating as a family. Ikra was one of the two participants who, during our first conversation, talked about being a vegetarian. After returning from family vacation, her thoughts on the subject changed; she did not want to be a hassle for her family or an outsider. When I asked about her vegetarianism, Ikra said, “I don’t know if that’s going to work out because my whole family likes East African food mainly and when we were out there, [meat] is the main thing they had, so I can’t be like I’m a vegetarian so everyone would look at me.”

Ikra also talked about the poor quality of school lunches during our second conversation, and her experiences with Islam and food. She said that during fasting (sun-up to sun-down for a month) she and her whole family cook together at night. The meal they
have at the end of the day is more meaningful because of fasting as well as the time spent working together to make the food. Photos 14 & 15 are Ikra’s photos.

Ikra

Narrative: We went to Minnesota and we mainly ate East African food. This is breakfast, that’s steak and that’s chicken. You’re supposed to eat it with that Ethiopian style bread.

Photo 7-14: Breakfast

Ikra

Narrative: This is what we had for lunch. It’s a rice bowl with chicken, then actual chicken. My whole family eats East African food, it always has meat. Everybody likes rice, but this is spaghetti and rice. We wanted to mix it up, so we had both.

Photo 7-15: Lunch
Tsheten and I also met one-on-one for our second conversation. Tsheten is an immigrant from South Asia and was very focused on the health of the foods she showed me. In fact, she showed me a photo of a box of cookies and explained that the cookies were even healthy. She seemed to want to show that she was “good” or “moral” by showing that she eats healthy foods and cares about what she puts in her body. Tsheten also talked about the importance of family in meals and eating. The second conversation with Tsheten was cut short because of her time constraints. Photos 16 & 17 are Tsheten’s photos.

Tsheten

Narrative: This is a snack made of garbanzo beans, flour, onions, chili and lettuce. We like to buy fresh vegetables and cook. We do not eat fast food usually because that’s not good for our health.

Photo 7-16: Paggie

Tsheten

Narrative: This has different flavors like sour and spicy. They have different parts. You put what is in the spoon in them, then you eat them. It’s called Pani Puri and usually people in Nepal eat it. For some people it would be hard to try for the first time because it’s full of liquid, and then when you eat it, you have to keep eating!

Photo 7-17: Pani Puri
A third conversation was scheduled for all participants to come back together to discuss the project and reflect on what they learned and how they felt about the work. Unfortunately, Creative Visions was unexpectedly closed the day this meeting was scheduled. This happens with non-profits, especially those with small staff. It is an unfortunate reality of limited budgets and time. However, even if Creative Visions was open, only three participants could have attended. One participant was traveling at the time and two were in team sports from which they could not break away. Time allocation is a difficult problem with high school students. Regardless, I met with all participants enough to gain their narratives and an understanding of their lived experiences with food.

Finally, the culmination of the photovoice project was an art show held at Creative Visions. The purpose of photovoice is to empower participants and incite action; however, because the participants were high school students, inequities in the food system were not explicitly examined in the photovoice project. Rather, care, health, and identity were the main focal points of the art show. This art show provided a way for the community to come together and gain awareness of food and how it is meaningful for these students. The three students who were able to attend reported feelings of excitement that people were looking at their work. People from other food aid organizations attended, noting their interest in youth programming and continuing work of the same goal. Because the art show focused on food and what food means, it was also a potluck-style get together. People were encouraged to
bring food from their culture or food that is important to them, and everyone who attended was welcome to eat, enjoy the art, and provide positive comments for the photographers.

Photos 7-18 – 7-20 depict the art show at Creative Visions.

Art Show
The community art show was held from 2 to 6 pm on a Saturday. Ako and Cynthia were both there from Creative Visions. They expressed interested in facilitating another showing of the art at a future date. As shown in Photo 7-18, the photos were displayed on small easels. Pieces of paper were provided, and I directed all visitors to share comments and reflections with the artists and myself by writing them down and placing them in the purple jars. The art show was also a potluck; because the study focuses on food, I felt it appropriate to have cultural foods from those who had the time and resources to provide it.

Most attendees were people from Iowa State University or community members curious about the traffic, but two DMARC staff also attended the show. They each spoke with me about how powerful the display was and expressed interest in developing a program for their “summer camp” in which youth are immersed in food and culture for a few days in July. The comments attendees left for myself and the photographers were heartwarming and also fit with the themes identified by the participants and me: body or health, identity, and care.
Photo 7-18. Writing Comments about the Photography

Photo 7-19. Photos on Display at the Art Show
The major themes that arose from the meetings were health, care, and identity. I will explore these concepts and how they relate to the conversations and photography below.

**Body: “You are what you eat.”**

In its most basic and literal sense, food consumption provides the nutrition we need to live. The food we consume becomes the energy and substance of our bodies. Food affects mental health, physical health, and its manifestation in our bodies drives others to define our moral character and socioeconomic status. Bodies must be the “right” size for a person to consume morally, but a person must have enough resources to consume healthy foods through their socioeconomic status. Health sciences are complex and dynamic, however, and must address socio-cultural and built environments in consumption studies (Popkin, et al.,
Food availability dictates the food we consume; if there are no apples anywhere a person goes on a regular basis, the likelihood of that person consuming an apple is low. Food issues exist on multiple scales but may be most directly observed through health impacts. Lack of access to healthy food has the effect of being underweight and of being overweight due to the reliance on commercial food supply (Dixon, Omwega, Friel, Burns, Donati, & Carlisle, 2007). Increased attention has been given to urban foods and the direct health effects it has on residents. Consumption of healthy food is a requisite for a healthy life. Without healthy food, it is fair to expect negative health impacts. “You are what you eat” is one statement that was iterated during meeting 1 of the photovoice project. On the poster, participants wrote energy, sustenance, energy and healthy, pointing to their knowledge of the importance of food in physical and even mental performance.

**Mental Health**

While physical manifestations of poor food quality can be seen with overweightness or underweightness, it is important to draw attention to effects that are less visible. A 2012 study revealed the prevalence of mental disorders among adolescents who experienced food insecurity. The study, which controlled for socio-economic status of parents, found that food insecurity is associated with mood disorders. “A 1 standard deviation increase in food insecurity was associated with a 14% increase in the odds of past-year mental disorder” (McLaughlin, Green, Alegria, Costello, Gruber, Sampson & Kessler, 2012, abstract). Further, the study reported that, “food insecurity is associated with adverse health outcomes in children and adolescents, including vitamin and nutrient deficiency, developmental delay, hospitalization, and overweight status, even after adjustment for family income.”
In Johnson et al.’s 2017 study involving food and urban youth of color, respondents reported concerns about access to healthy food and even about knowing which foods are healthy and unhealthy. Beyond having concern for their own bodies, they have concerns for family members’ personal health and consumption practices. Health studies have identified racial or ethnic minorities as being at a greater risk for developing health issues. Racial and ethnic minority peoples “experience higher rates of illness, impairment and death than the average of their societies in the U.S. and globally” (Williams, Priest, & Anderson, 2016). Researchers reported that the greatest indicator or health disparities, however, is socioeconomic status (Williams et al., 2016), indicating the issue is structural rather than cultural. Regardless, the manifestations of health impacts (positive or negative) related to food consumption are important to address.

**Physical Health**

Diet-related diseases are “leading causes of disability and premature death in the United States” and weigh more heavily on People of Color (Lucan, 2014). The importance of overweightness and obesity have been somewhat contested, but in general, having a BMI (Body Mass Index) outside the normal range seems to be correlated to increased health risks (Campos, Saguy, Ernsberger, Oliver, & Gaesser, 2006; Falbe, Cotterman, Linchey & Madsen, 2016; Williams, et. al., 2016). Falbe et al. (2016) found a connection between ethnic identity and high BMI (Body Mass Index) in California. Madrigal and their colleagues identified health problems such as obesity and diabetes among Latinx youth in their photovoice study in an urban setting (Madrigal, Salvatore, Casillas, Casillas, Vera, Eskenazi, & Minkler, 2014). Johnson et al. (2017) identified similar concerns in New York in their study of food in the urban landscapes of Color. Obesity and overweightness tend to be
explained by food intake, and particularly, convenience foods such as fast food and pre-packaged meals (Lucan, 2014; Halkier, 2013). Increased weight has been correlated to a lack of healthy food availability in the local environment but also to a lack of knowledge about healthy foods (Alkon, et al., 2013). Despite conflicting claims of the physical health consequences of overweightness and obesity, it often has a negative social effect on perceptions of self and perceptions of other individuals.

**Moral Character**

As average weight and obesity have increased in the United States, so has a ‘moral panic’ about it (Parsons, 2015; Campos, Saguy, Ernsbrger, Oliver, & Gaesser, 2006). This moral panic is perpetuated often in media and its effects on perceptions of food and, in turn, the people who eat certain foods (Halkier, 2013). Media narratives can be extremely harmful in this way. In the article “Foodways of the Urban Poor” (2013) the researchers point out the media’s narrative about low-income people simply lacking knowledge or desire to obtain healthy foods, though it is not reflective of reality (Alkon, Block, Moore, Gillis, DiNuccio, & Chavez).

Food “is the link between social and bodily expressions of control, being both an aperture of the body and a social entrance and exit” (Bell & Valentine, 1997, p. 44). In other words, food impacts the way we present ourselves in the world, how others react to us, and how we react to our own selves. In fact, taste and knowledge of ‘good’ food are often “considered indicator[s] of high cultural capital” (Parsons, 2015, p. 79). Eating healthy is considered to be an expression of moral goodness, and the reflection of healthy eating in body have an effect on social standing of individuals. “Thus, those that ‘lack’ access to
cultural resources or fail to abide by public policy discourses on ‘healthy’ foodways are subject to moral approbation and stigma” (Parsons, 2015, p. 163).

**Socioeconomic Status**

Overall, many scholars have critiqued the historic focus on simply the negative health effects of certain foods and subsequent demonization of foods and peoples (Alkon et al., 2013; Halkier, 2013; Stehr & Adolf, 2010). It has been argued that too much attention has been paid to food and *choice* when, in fact, choice is often not part of the equation for marginalized peoples. Alkon et al. (2013) found that “cost, not lack of knowledge or physical distance, is the primary barrier to healthy food access” (p. 126). These researchers examined low-income people’s food habits in five regions to understand what is truly happening on the ground. The finding that price is the most important consideration in buying foods exposes the false narrative of low-income individuals as in need of education; it also confronts the oft-cited ‘solution’ of proximal grocery stores. It exposes the deeper socio-economic barriers to certain people’s right to obtain adequate and healthy nutrition.

Michelle Szabo (2011) argues that an increased attention and investment in local foods would have a great impact on diet-related health issues that stem from the industrial food system. Szabo, in “The challenges of “re-engaging with food””, argues that a deeper connection and involvement with food including production, preparation, and cooking would have a positive effect on health, but that this involvement is only possible with larger societal changes in “employment conditions and the gendered division of labor” (abstract). Delind (2006) asserts a similar argument for local foods, recognizing that the focus on local foods largely is not enough. While the mainstream belief is that, “local food is understood to be fresher, riper, more nutritious, and thus a healthier product than its long-distance counterpart”
(p. 123), it requires contextualization. Local foods would eliminate the preservatives and hidden calories consumed in convenience foods, and the consumer may have more autonomy when it comes to food production considerations; however, “without an emotional, a spiritual, and a physical glue to create loyalty, not to a product, but to layered sets of embodied relationships, local will have no power” (p. 126). Delind explains that, without a shift away from viewing food as a commodity and toward viewing food as community. Local food and addressing the health issues that are inherent in the commodification of food will require a deep attention to food processes and a deep shift in the food system.

The health impacts many researchers have identified in low-income communities and Communities of Color were not at the forefront of our conversations. The participants did talk about health and energy, but rarely about the food in the neighborhood. One participant said, “people eat too much McDonald’s”, implying there are too may unhealthy foods in the region, but most participants ate at home, with their families, and discussed the importance of health and knowing what one puts into their body. During our first conversation, Ikra said, “I wrote energy [on the board] because food creates energy. Every time you’re low on energy you can eat food. It helps you gather energy because without food you’d be dead.” She spoke of the importance of feeling good and feeling healthy. Tsheten echoed these sentiments. During my second conversation with Tsheten, she brought up the health of food often. “We like to buy fresh vegetables and cook, like not like fast food and everything. I mean, we eat that but not usually, because that’s bad for our health.” This reflects Tsheten’s desire to be seen as moral or good in my eyes; she wanted to make it clear she is health-conscious.

Participants focused much more on food as care and food as identity than they did on food as health. Mary Ann’s mention of carb-loading for swimming pertains to health; food is
necessary to maintain energy levels, but the correct amount of food must be consumed.
Participants did not mention socioeconomic status; this variable is likely less visible for youth than it would have been if their parents or other community members were instead involved in this project. Iain and Ivin, during our first conversation, mentioned the importance of eating high energy foods. Though there is much literature on the importance of food and nutrition in mental and physical health, this did not end up being the focus for this participant-guided project.

**Care: “Food is smiles.”**

Food can be seen as an expression of care and love (Bell & Valentine, 1997; Campbell & Crawford, 2001; Kaplan, 1999; Moisio et al., 2004; Parsons, 2015). As social creatures, sharing food with one another is associated with friendship, family, and trust (Moore, 1957). We tend to eat what our social network eats, with special attention given to the preference of our mother (Moisio, et al., 2004). Special attention has been given to the study of the meaning of food and its role in family dynamics. Family meals have been a bedrock of the American lifestyle for a long time, and their components tend to reinforce patriarchal, class, and cultural ideals. “Home is the site of multiple, sometimes contradictory, consumption practices crossed by complex webs of power relations between household members – and that these in turn both shape and are shaped by the ways in which both individual and household identities are constituted” (Bell & Valentine, 1997, p. 59). Home and family are also the ways people tend to learn manners and culture. Though there is quite a bit of literature about food and families, it is worth noting it is largely heteronormative in its analyses. That may be because the “traditional” home-cooked meal is so deeply embedded in the “traditional” ideal family structure. Much of it focuses on the role of the mother versus
the role of the father, rarely venturing from the nuclear family structure. Food studies about family dynamics have not significantly changed since Moore, in 1957, asserted “to eat is human, to feed, maternal” (p. 79).

The concept of a family dinner is rooted in a stew of gender and power roles (Bell & Valentine, 1997; Julier, 2013). Mothers have typically been the providers of meals, as women are typically thought of as the caregivers in the family. Caregiving tasks, including making and providing meals, traditionally center on the husband’s activities, reproducing gender roles and defining whose time is most important. Even when mothers work outside the home they often fill the role of meal provider. Children of working mothers sometimes report being frustrated by the “time squeeze” and the ability or inability of their mothers (but not fathers) to make “good food” (Kaplan, 1999).

Studying food and the relationships it pertains to in the home and family unit can uncover issues in power, societal expectations, and societal structures. Mothers may feel pressure to fulfill breadwinner and caregiver roles, though to do both would require more hours in a day. Food tells us about bonds and care between people. Studying food and the relationships it pertains to in the home and family unit can uncover issues in power, societal expectations, and societal structures. Zach talked about his mother in his first photo (Photo 3: Food is Smiles). He talked about how children who play outside often come in briefly, ask their mother to make some food, then rush back out to climb more trees. He specifically mentioned mother, not father in this statement. Likewise, Ikra, Tsheten, Patience, and Mary Ann all mentioned their mothers when discussing family dinners. They implied their mothers are the ones responsible for making food for the rest of the family. Tsheten said, “my mom is the one that cooks, and we usually watch while we are eating and talk.” Ikra, Patience, and
Joyce all talked about having responsibilities of cooking, too. Joyce said that at times, her mother will just tell her she is making meals. “Sometimes, my mom tells me like, “you’re cooking tomorrow”” she reported. Tsheten replied, “I cook for my sister.” It is clear these high school students have responsibilities when it comes to food that relate to family dynamics. With only one final male participant, it is difficult to establish if gender roles dictate food and cooking responsibilities among participants. Those who talked about cooking for their families also mentioned their younger siblings, implying a family dynamic in which older children care for younger ones.

Scholars argue that food, including the preparation time it takes, is a manifestation of love or caring for another person. Kaplan (1999) looked at children of working parents perceptions’ of food. Her findings echo the traditional held beliefs surrounding the mother’s role in the production of meals, but also reveals more nuance in food interactions. By interviewing children of working parents, she confronted family situations in which time constraints were common. Children sometimes expressed their relationship to food as a way for them to show their own love and care. For instance, one respondent reported making dinner for her younger siblings when her mother had to work late. She felt this was a way to show her care for her mother. Other times, children reported feeling alienated or unhappy with their own family in comparison to others. If their parents did not have enough time to make homemade food, yet the respondent’s friends had different experiences, resentment and misunderstanding might build. None of the participants in my photovoice study reported negative feelings about being responsible for food. They focused on themselves for the most part, though they clearly had responsibilities at home to feed their younger siblings and help with community events. Ikra, a young woman who wears a hijab, talked about having to help
prepare meals during fasting. Her mother asks her for help while the sun is still up to prepare meals for breaking the fast. She talked of smelling the food and how difficult it is to not eat it before sundown, but also about how important it is to her religion and her family.

Julier (2013) studied food and its place in friendship. Using observations from her own interactions, Julier expressed the idea that food makes homes more comfortable. Cooking together or providing meals as a group builds emotional bonds and strengthens relationships. There is a reason people tend to gather in the kitchen; the shared practice of cooking and eating provides a relaxed, warm, friendly opportunity to spend quality time together. “Food and eating, in and of themselves, are looked upon as symbolizing interpersonal acceptance, friendliness, sociability, or warmth” (Moore, 1957, p. 77). Joyce and Patience, who share culture and proximity, bonded over their shared experiences with cooking and with eating. They spoke with me together every time, with Joyce even translating many food items to English for Patience when showing photos. Mary Ann and Zach also clearly bonded over food items. “If [Mary Ann] is feeling sick I’ll make her care packages, and I’ll throw in saltines even though you don’t really eat them that much. But I put it in there just in case she’s not feeling good and she wants something light.”

Convenience foods and their role in family dynamics have been studied by some (Halkier, 2003 Moisio et al., 2004). There is a certain stigma attached to convenience foods (fast food and processed, pre-packaged foods) that is perpetuated in media. People tend to moralize convenience foods and the parents who feed them to their families, yet the larger societal systems that increase the need for these convenience meals are not moralized. Children of parents who use convenience meals may feel some distain for their family if they hold these standards (Kaplan, 1999; Parsons, 2015).
Parsons (2015) conducted a study aimed at understanding the meaning of food through online requests for food narratives. In the responses she received, there was a huge emphasis on family and the importance of family in food practices and memories. Parsons explained that foodways draw people together, create bonds, and even work to exclude others; food practices integral to social connections and sociability. “Foodways are the means by which families perform and reproduce socio-cultural norms everyday” (p. 27). Joyce and Patience spoke of the bond they created with one another when they met. Though the bond is tied to more than food, their shared food heritage contributed to their shared identity. I asked when the two met, because they seemed so close. They had just met within the last year. Joyce said, “I feel like if you’re the same… ethnicity, culture or heritage or something, you bond easier.” Their quick bond and clear understanding of one another and one another’s food habits reflected this bond, and their shared identity. While they created this bond, they (perhaps inadvertently) exclude others from other cultures. Similarly, Zach and Mary Ann talked about having shared “tummy issues.” Their shared bond over food issues brought them closer together and probably created something of a barrier between themselves and others.

Tsheten, Ikra, Patience, and Joyce all spoke of their family and their identity in their culture often. Ikra spoke of her entire family eating East African food together, and how she could not be a vegetarian because she would not be able to participate in family meals the same way. Mary Ann spoke of her large family meals and how gathering around one table to eat brought people closer together. Her photo “Whirlwind of a Dinner” (Photo 4) was captioned: “Spaghetti is kind of messy and just kind of flops. It’s a whirlwind because it’s messy just like dinner conversation. You just kind of flow around topics and if it stops, you just kind of pick up wherever.” When Mary Ann sees her extended family, they coalesce
around the table to eat together, share photos, and catch up with one another. The group works together to get everything cleaned up before her grandmother has to worry about any dishes or leftovers, as she is always the last one to finish eating. “My grandma really likes displaying the food. She has arthritis now so it’s hard for her to hold the utensils, but she always tries to eat as elegantly as possible. She’s the slowest eater so she’s the one who, we wait 20 minutes after everyone else is done eating and she’s still eating so, [laughs], it’s fun.”

People bond and create a sense of community with one another by feeding one another and sharing meals. These ties and bonds allow people to share ideas about the food, but also foster their close relationships (Julier, 2013). In addition to personal relationships, food is seen as care in charity and religious organizations as well.

**Identity: “You’re not forgetting your culture.”**

Identity has been a concept integral to a number of sciences, including philosophy, psychology, sociology, anthropology and their related fields (Deaux, 1993). At the very simplest, identity describes who a person is, the group(s) they belong to, and who a group is. “Categories such as gender, race, and ethnicity are forms of identity that provide a basis for self-definition” (Deaux, 1993, p. 4). I will add that identity is related to heritage, family, and likely many more social structures. According to Turner (1987), there are three levels of identity: human, social, and personal. Identity is a social concept, with members of certain groups that claim a certain identity having certain traits. It creates an in-group and an out-group, or the insider/outsider dynamic between people (Deaux, 1993). Iris Marion Young (2016) argues that everyone belongs to numerous groups based on identity. For instance, a man belongs to a certain gender group but also cuts across religious, class, race, age, and other groups (p. 390). Identity, according to Young, “consists in both the individual and their
relationships” (p. 391). Further, social groups are structural and relate to political and social inequities (Young, 2016, p. 393).

Shared social identity results in a community – not to be confused with the concept of community as a place. Community in this definition can encompass place, as living in a certain place does create a shared identity, but it can also transcend space and time (think LGBTQ community, African American community, Latinx community, etc.) (Almerico, 2014). People do not belong to only one community, but many at any single point in time. The participants in this study, for instance, belong to the Des Moines community and the Roosevelt community, but also fall into broader and more stringent categories and groups. Communities help us determine who we are and how we should act, as well as provide us with a sense of belonging. Alternatively, communities are as much about inclusion as they are about exclusion. The specific characteristics that define a community allow some in but not others. Food is used by groups and individuals to differentiate themselves from others (Fischler, 1988).

**Oneness**

Fischler (1988) said that food is an integral part of every level of identity: human, social, and personal. Using Paul Rozin’s work, Fischler explains that human’s omnivorous trait “implies a fundamental ambivalence” about food (p. 277). Because humans are provided so much choice in our diet and necessarily eat a multitude of food types to obtain all required ingredients, the diversity of foods that we choose to consume contributes greatly to identity. Next, Fischler (still agreeing with Rozin’s work) explains the socially constructed concept of disgust. While on a biological level, disgust should deter people from eating certain foods, a socially inherited disgust comes from the behaviors we observe, the patterns we live, and
other cultural norms we experience. Cultural norms tell us when it is appropriate to eat certain food items, what food items go together, and what food items are unacceptable (Rozin, 1999). Conceptions of what is disgusting or not disgusting can be manifestations of our cultural identity. For example, I have never eaten a chicken foot, but Patience presented a picture of peanut butter soup with chicken feet, fish scales, and other foods I would not think to eat. This is a reflection of different cultural norms and different ideas of what acceptable foodstuff and meals are.

In her seminal 1957 work, Harriet Moore discussed these concepts as well. She argued that like friend and family groups eat like food, suggesting a shared identity. On an individual trait level, Moore discussed the concepts of certain foods as masculine or feminine. Men, traditionally or stereotypically, are associated with meat and hefty types of foods, while women, stereotypically, are associated with vegetables and light foods.

**Otherness**

In Kaplan’s 1999 study of children with working parents, she interviewed two African American girls about their food habits. These children explained how their food choices set them apart from their white counterparts at school and beyond. They claimed ownership over soul food and spices, joking about their tendency to bring extra seasoning when they eat dinner at a white friend’s home. These kids used food to explain their unique identity in the scheme of the social network they belong to – exposing the insider/outside social boundary seen through food practices. Joyce and Patience spoke of an extremely spicy pepper sauce when I had a third conversation with them. A fish and attieke dish they bought from a local ethnic food store comes with a spicy sauce. They were very sure I would not be able to handle the spice level of the pepper sauce. Kaplan also mentioned the social stigma
that many children felt and expressed in having free and reduced lunch needs. Their identity is, in some ways, defined by their need of assistance. A similar concept manifested in our first group conversation when Langston, his brothers, and Ikra talked about eating different lunches than other children at school when pork was served due to religious dietary constraints. The poor substitute (peanut butter and jelly sandwich) made these individuals outsiders on these lunch days.

Community

Identity and culture were perhaps the most talked about themes that came from the photovoice project. With such a diverse group of young people, this is unsurprising. Immigrants and their children have a sense of place, but that sense of place is somewhat split between their current home and their homeland. The stores and restaurants that sell familiar foods provide a sense of place and community, but other parts of the region may seem foreign even after much time. Even so, people of a particular cultural group tend to find one another, it seems. I asked Joyce and Patience about where they buy their groceries. While their mothers do shop at C Fresh, Wal-Mart and Sam’s Club, they also mentioned African stores. They were not aware of the names or locations, but said, “There are a lot of African stores but they’re very… closed off. It won’t really look like a store unless you go inside. They’re hidden, so I don’t know how they found it.”

Patience and Joyce were outspoken about their cultural identity pertaining to food. During our conversations, it was difficult to cross the cultural barrier between us. The language Joyce and Patience use to talk about their food items is not English, so it was difficult for them to find the names of certain vegetables or fruits and difficult for them to describe the flavor. Food from their culture is not like anything from my own culture, so it
was difficult to imagine the flavors they were talking about as well. Food is so central to
identity, but most of us do not think about it until we must.

Ikra spoke of her family’s connection to East African food. During the week she took
photos, her family traveled to Minneapolis. They ate at East African restaurants every day
while there. She said everyone in her family eats these same foods, and it would be too
difficult to deviate from the familial and cultural norms. Prior to their vacation, Ikra was
trying to become a vegetarian. The food options when traveling and the cultural significance
of meat, though, changed her mind while she was away. Tsheten does identify as a
vegetarian. This is an important part of her personal identity rather than cultural identity.

Tsheten spoke of frequenting Asian food stores and cooking traditional foods with her
family, but also of how foods can bring people of different cultural identities together. “I
think [food] also brings people together like from different cultures. You’re not forgetting
your culture.”

Conclusion

Photovoice with youth participants revealed some of the underlying meanings of food
in their lives. Understanding the lived experiences related to food is vital to food justice
initiatives. If interventions are not reflected in the everyday lived experiences of the target
population, they will not succeed. Youth have the unique perspective of immersion in family
and friend culture while remaining free of economic responsibility for the food. The themes
these participants came up with and discussed in the photovoice project indicate what is
important in their food system and food experiences.
This photovoice project reveals the importance of food in daily life for youth and for community members. The themes – health, care, and identity – were revealed to be important to the participants. Participants mentioned health in a dogmatic manner; these youth have been told about the importance of paying attention to health of food. The conversations and attention were much more dynamic and energetic when they focused on care and identity. This group of participants included four immigrants, so the tie to identity is strong among them. The perspectives of these youth fill a gap that must be addressed in food justice initiatives: they must be informed by storytelling and lived experiences of those affected by the initiative.

Taken together, analysis of the lived experience of youth, the community organization perspective, and the network analysis provide a nuanced picture of the Des Moines food system and what food means on three scales. The next chapter provides a summary of the findings and suggests how food justice can grow in Des Moines.
CHAPTER 8. CONCLUSION

This research used a food justice framework to examine the food system of Des Moines, Iowa. This food justice framework asserts that for food systems or food movements to be just, they must: include lived experience and be rooted in place; recognize broad historic and societal inequities; cultivate relationships among organizations; and be able to create “community-focused action” and “larger-scale cultural and political transformation” (Broad, 2016, p. 26). This research is situated in this framework because it addresses food as lived experience and in place, the network of food organizations, and has the potential to incite action if photovoice and Participatory Action Research are continued and organizations utilize the network analysis. This research aimed to answer three questions about the food system in Des Moines and what food means:

1. How is the network of food organizations structured in Des Moines?

2. What role does Creative Visions, a non-profit organization in a low-income community, play in the food network of Des Moines?

3. What experiences do youth residents of the low-income community have with food?

Utilizing network analysis, interviews, and photovoice, I analyzed three scales of food in the city. I used a food justice framework to analyze the meaning of food on these three scales, concluding that on the network level food is viewed as a commodity; food is community development to Creative Visions; and food is care, health, and identity to urban youth living in the low-income community where Creative Visions is located. These analyses provided a picture of the food system in Des Moines and addressed my research questions.
1. How is the network of food organizations structured in Des Moines?

The network of food organizations in Des Moines is structured with production-oriented organizations in central, strongly connected positions. Food banks are prominent in the region as well as refugee services, and Eat Greater Des Moines. There is evidence of a “good poor” and “bad poor” narrative, with refugees deserving more aid than other low-income individuals and communities. There is a focus on production even within refugee aid services; it is unclear exactly what the role of refugees is in this food system, but production is central. Community-based organizations such as Creative Visions are peripheral in the food system, and likely have less influence, power, and leverage to affect change.

2. What role does Creative Visions, a non-profit organization in a low-income community, play in the food network of Des Moines?

Creative Visions, according to the network analysis, is a peripheral organization in the food organization network of Des Moines. In terms of transformation, Creative Visions likely does not have ample influence over other organization or the flow of information and resources in the city. However, Creative Visions is an important structure within its community. It provides life-saving food resources for its residents as well as people from across the metro area. Its staff are committed to increasing justice and recognize historic and socioeconomic inequity.

3. What experiences do youth residents of the low-income community have with food?

Youth residents of low-income communities in Des Moines largely related food to care and identity. During the photovoice project, they identified important themes that
describe what food means to them and who they are. Youth provide a unique perspective when it comes to food, as they do not necessarily have the freedom of choice adults have. The four immigrants in the photovoice project made clear that food is deeply connected to cultural heritage and identity. All participants discussed making food as an act of care, whether it was cooking for younger siblings, for friends or significant others, or from their mothers or fathers for the individuals.

**Placement in Food Justice**

The food justice framework used in this study calls for four requirements to be met for alternative food movements. I utilized these requirements in research instead. In Participatory Action Research, storytelling and autonomy are vital pieces of the process and outcomes. I employed photovoice with the goal of initiating programming that has the potential to incite sustainable change in the community (if continued). Utilizing PAR, network analysis methods, and establishing myself as an ally in a place-based community development organization that champions black leadership and equity exemplifies the principles of food justice. While this research adds to the literature on the meaning of food and how it manifests in lived experience, community development, and networks, it also uses ethical, action-oriented means to do so.

This research reinforces the fact that food has deeper value than the sustenance it provides. Access to food can be the difference between life and death for some, so food pantries and alternative food movements and structures are vital infrastructure. Food is also viewed as an economic asset and a way to generate income – but the beneficiaries of this income vary depending on the system. If equity and the right to food are central to the initiative, food justice can have incredible impacts on people’s lives.
This research contributes to the right to food agenda because it examines how important food in the lives of individual people and in communities. Food is necessary for people to prosper, and people deserve to have access to healthy (as well as unhealthy) food in their neighborhood. The uneven distribution of food access in communities across the country hinders those who lack access to affordable food from reaching their full potential. They are denied the chance to attain prosperity at the same level as those who have constant access to healthy and affordable food. The United Nations and the right to food framework assert that people do have the right to food and to a healthy life.

Examining the lived experiences people have with food grounds food in reality. True change to hegemonic power arises from “shifting communities in everyday life” (Mares & Pena, 2010). While food is viewed as a commodity in the traditional neoliberal food system, insurgent practices work outside of this realm to increase equity and justice (Miraftab, 2009). Some conversations from the photovoice project pointed to insurgent food practices, such as community events in which all members prepare the meal. Community gardens and growing food at home are insurgent practices, creating a space for access to food that otherwise is not present. These ventures, however small, may amalgamate to large scale change. Planners and planning scholarship should consider these practices in their work.

**What does Food Mean to Planners?**

Planners have increasingly paid attention to food systems and addressed them in their work, but often maintain gaps in their knowledge or efforts. However, planners and decision-makers often reduce food to its “needs-based nutritional agenda” when considering food access, food security, and food policy (Morgan, 2014, p. 12). Planners should consider food governance in their work; they should dig in to discover who is making decisions and why
decisions are being made in the food system. Planning is interdisciplinary in nature. When food is included, planners must consider the larger socio-economic and historic trends that influence the lived experiences of marginalized people within the food system.

In order for food justice transformation to occur, the lived experiences of residents must be included in problem-framing and decision-making. Without the lived experiences of residents, important voices are not heard. At best without the voices of those in the community, the transformation is unsustainable; at worst, it decreases the quality of life of the same people. Top-down approaches to food system issues, and many alternative food movements as the literature shows, often miss the nuances that exist in a given place, among cultures, institutions, and more. Situating change in place by recognizing and giving power to the voices of those who will feel the effects of a plan or policy is necessary for food justice.

Opportunities for Transformation

This research has defined the meaning of food on three scales in Des Moines: the network, organization, and individual levels. The findings included in this work can be used to transform Des Moines and create food justice that transcend scale while maintaining people-oriented, place-based improvements.

The network analysis illustrated the organizations that have the most influence in the network. These organizations can be targeted for transformation implementation because of their power and influence over the flow of information in the system. If the most important organizations in the region turn their sights on equity rather than production, the effects could be massive as they tumble down the chain of organizations.

Food organizations can use the network analysis diagrams to forge new partnerships and reinforce existing relationships with other organizations. Increased collaboration can
result in resource sharing – intellectual, capital, infrastructural, and more. It creates bonds between people and is a vehicle for establishing and maintaining trust in a system. Sharing resources and, even goals, can have an immensely positive impact. Fostering relationships built on the same goals increases the likelihood of goal attainment. Further, food organizations can use the lived experiences of people to create policies and advocate for changes that would make the food system more equitable and just.

Creative Visions and other community development organizations can continue programming that focuses on food utilizing a food justice framework that emphasizes empowerment and draws attention to the food system. DMARC and Creative Visions are two organizations interested in continuing photovoice as a method to engage people in the discussion around food and draw attention to the importance of food in Des Moines. Currently, lived experiences reflect the importance of place because of shared identity, but not because of infrastructure or specific sites in the community. Developing community garden plots and place-based education on site at community development organizations can help foster a sense of place and pride in community. Gardens and place-based education should emphasize self-sufficiency and food justice.

Food is an integral aspect of every person’s lived experience. It permeates our perceptions of others, our cultures, health, and relationships. With its omnipresence in our lives and in every landscape, it must be considered in planning. Food systems can be used to develop more equitable and democratic systems that serve the populations that have been historically and socioeconomically oppressed by the neoliberal hegemony underpinning the food system. Planners can use food to increase health and well-being: economic, social, environmental, physical, and psychological. If planners shift the rhetoric from individual
*choice* (market behavior/moral market) to *community prosperity* (right to food/opportunity) they can create sustainable change and increase equity and justice. The food system, as with planning, permeates every place and structure of society. Improvements within the food system will result in a better world for all.
REFERENCES


APPENDIX A. SURVEY

About Survey
This survey was created to better understand the food system of Des Moines, Iowa. We are interested in your experience with collaboration and your perception of the food system. We hope to gain an understanding of the connections among food organizations of Des Moines to provide context for a qualitative study of the King Irving neighborhood.

The survey should take approximately 10-15 minutes to complete. Thank you in advance for your valuable input.

General Information

Question 1: My ORGANIZATION is a:

- City Government Agency
- County Government Agency
- Employee owned company
- Cooperative
- Non-profit organization
- Private company
- Other (Please Specify) __________________________________________

Question 2: What does your organization do related to food access in the Greater Des Moines Area?
________________________________________________________________

Question 3: What does your organization do related to food security in the Greater Des Moines Area?
________________________________________________________________

Question 4: Is your organization currently working in a COLLABORATIVE MANNER with other organizations in Des Moines?

- Yes
- No

Question 5: Indicate which ORGANIZATIONS you currently work with. (Select all that apply.)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Food Bank of Iowa</th>
<th>Des Moines Area Religious Council (DMARC)</th>
<th>Des Moines Public Schools</th>
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<tr>
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<td>Urban Dreams</td>
<td>International Association for Food Protection</td>
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<tr>
<td>Eat Greater Des Moines</td>
<td>Local Food Systems Council</td>
<td>Children and Family Urban Movement (CFUM)</td>
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<td>Meals from the Heartland</td>
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<td>Simple Health DSM</td>
<td>Catholic Charities</td>
<td>Fareway</td>
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<td>Central Iowa Shelter &amp; Services</td>
<td>Iowa Restaurant Association</td>
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<td>The Des Moines Farmer’s Market</td>
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<td>Gateway Market</td>
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<td>Network Refugee Center</td>
<td>Faith &amp; Grace Garden</td>
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<tr>
<td>Meals on Wheels</td>
<td>Homes 4 My Peeps</td>
<td>Hy-Vee</td>
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<td>Caring Hands Outreach Center</td>
<td>Drake University</td>
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<td>US Committee for Refugees and Immigrants</td>
<td>Ethnic Minorities of Burma Resource and Advocacy Center (EMBARC)</td>
<td>Refugee Alliance of Central Iowa</td>
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<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>Other ____________________</td>
<td>Other ____________________</td>
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</table>

**Question 6:** From the organizations you identified above, please list the **THREE ORGANIZATIONS** that are currently your most important partners for food-related work.

**Question 7:** To what extent do you agree with the following **STATEMENTS** (Scale from one to five or choose not to answer):

- My organization collaborates well with other organizations in Des Moines.
- My organization works well with other organizations in Des Moines.

<table>
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<th>Somewhat agree (2)</th>
<th>Neither Agree nor Disagree (3)</th>
<th>Somewhat disagree (4)</th>
<th>Strongly disagree (5)</th>
<th>No Answer (6)</th>
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Food-related organizations in Des Moines share a common goal. We have enough resources for food programs in my organization. There is competition between food program organizations in Des Moines. I would like to increase collaboration with food program organizations. Government organizations provides adequate resources for food programs. Organizations in Des Moines fulfill food access needs for residents. My organization reaches out to low-income residents to understand their needs. My organization provides leadership for food programing in Des Moines. My organization helps low-income communities with food access. My organization increases food security in Des Moines.
My organization values participation of low-income residents to discuss issues related to food access and food security. Food access in Des Moines has improved in recent years. Food access in Des Moines is better than other cities in Iowa. Food organizations care about food access for low-income communities in Des Moines.

**Question 8:** What are two ways food access in Des Moines could be improved for low-income communities?

**Question 9:** What obstacles does your organization face when collaborating with other food organizations?

**Question 10:** How could food organizations overcome these obstacles to increase collaboration?

**Question 11:** What two actions could improve food access in Des Moines most significantly?

**Question 12:** What is your vision for the food system, including food access, in Des Moines?

Thank you for your participation!
## APPENDIX B. NETWORK ANALYSIS ORGANIZATIONS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Organization</th>
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<tbody>
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<td>Broadlawns - WIC</td>
<td>Other Non-profit</td>
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<td>Capital Crossroads</td>
<td>Other Non-profit</td>
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<td>Caring Hands Outreach Center</td>
<td>Food Pantry</td>
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<td>Catholic Charities</td>
<td>Food Pantry</td>
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<td>Central Iowa Shelter &amp; Services</td>
<td>Other Non-profit</td>
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<tr>
<td>C-Fresh</td>
<td>Vendor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CFUM</td>
<td>Other Non-profit</td>
</tr>
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<td>City of Des Moines</td>
<td>Government</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creative Visions</td>
<td>Food-Focused Non-profit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Des Moines Farmer's Market</td>
<td>Vendor</td>
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<td>Refugee-Focused Non-profit</td>
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<td>Fareway</td>
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APPENDIX C. NARRATIVES & ART SHOW RESPONSES

Mary Ann Narratives

Slow Eater

My grandma really likes displaying the food. She has arthritis now so it’s hard for her to hold the utensils, but she always tries to eat as elegantly as possible. She’s the slowest eater so she’s the one who, we wait 20 minutes after everyone else is done eating and she’s still eating. It’s fun!

A Whirlwind of a Dinner

Spaghetti is kind of messy and just kind of flops. It’s a whirlwind because it’s messy just like dinner conversation. You just kind of flow around topics and if it stops, you just kind of pick up wherever.

A Meal Well Done

This is at the end of the meal right before we start cleaning up. What we always do, since my grandma is always the last to finish, is while she is talking we stack up the plates and get all the trash together but try not to pressure her. That way as soon as she’s done, we all are. You can also tell we like salt more than pepper!

The Aftermath

This one is just the aftermath. It makes you sigh. The plate is so messy, and you wonder why you ate so much. For me, that milk, I felt really bad for wasting but I knew I couldn’t finish it.

Crispy

This is an appetizer before a meal. This is just me and my mom because I went to college visits with her and my family didn’t want to come on a tour of a college they’re not going to go to. My grandparents are nowhere near the age of going back to college. When I travel for swim meets, it’s usually just me and my mom and we have our tradition of going to Maid-Rite. Mother-daughter type dates.

Everything Breakfast

I love breakfast like this. It had everything. This was at my grandparent’s house. It was good – very good. And this is when my aunt got to town which is nice, I don’t usually get to see her. We always have orange juice and toast with breakfast. My grandparents, when they make toast in the beginning, they just have to keep going and going. Usually it’s a way larger stack, like 15 pieces.
Digging In

The hands are my brother’s. He loves Mexican food and can always clean a plate. Plus he’s a runner so he eats a lot. Yet this time he just could not finish the meal—which is so shocking my mom had to take a picture of the unfinished rice and beans! We’re adopted—my brother and I—but he’s the only one that actually looks Latino. I just look white, and my taste buds match with that pretty closely, but his love the food. Anyhow, that restaurant was my dad’s favorite while growing up. So we try to go each time we visit with his childhood friends. It’s super tasty!

Zach Narratives

Healthy, Happy

This is a PB & J split in half. The raisins are the pupils, there’s half a Triscuit for the nose, and green grapes for the smile. You can’t go wrong with PB & J. It’s the type of food that a kid who’s busy playing outside would eat. Like if you play outside climbing trees, you run inside for a minute and ask your mom to make food, that’s what she’ll make and you’ll go back outside. And the grapes. It’s fruit, it’s nature, green, chlorophyll, healthy.

Sprinkle Toast

It’s a piece of what we call sprinkle toast. It’s just cinnamon sugar on some buttered toast. I always make Mary Ann sprinkle toast, so it’s important to me because it always makes her smile and it tastes good. And when I was little, my dad would always make this for me. I’d fold it in half, I know it sounds kind of barbaric, but he would make it for me and I’d eat it like a half sandwich.

Easy Care and Healing

This is a pair of saltines I drew on. They’re supposed to be hugging. Whenever I get sick or I’m not feeling good, my mom would always suggest I eat some crackers. Same with Mary Ann. I make her care packages and I’ll throw in saltines just in case she’s not feeling good and she wants something light.

Ikra Narratives

Sandwich & Chips (2 photos)

My sister got this sandwich the day after our first meeting. I liked how it looked so I took a picture.
Breakfast

We went to Minnesota and we mainly ate East African food. This is breakfast, that’s steak and that’s chicken. You’re supposed to eat it with that Ethiopian style bread.

Lunch (2 photos)

This is what we had for lunch. It’s a rice bowl with chicken, then actual chicken. My whole family eats East African food, it always has meat.

Mix it up with Spaghetti

This is East African food again. Everybody likes rice, but this is spaghetti and rice. We wanted to mix it up, so we had both.

Tsheten Narratives

Biryani

This photo is called biryani which is made of basmati rice, special seasoning and vegetables which is eaten in special occasions such as festivals.

Paggie

This is a snack made of garbanzo beans, flour, onions, chili and lettuce. We like to buy fresh vegetables and cook. We do not eat fast food usually because that’s not good for our health.

Pani Puri

This has different flavors like sour and spicy. They have different parts. You put what is in the spoon in them, then you eat them. It’s called Pani Puri and usually people in Nepal eat it. For some people it would be hard to try for the first time because it’s full of liquid, and then when you eat it, you have to keep eating!

Chatpata

This is made of puff rice and has seasoning such as chili powder peas, potatoes, uncooked noodles and some vegetables. All the food is healthy. This is the kind of food we have for family dinners. My mom is the one that cooks, and we usually watch while we are eating and talk.
Joyce Narratives

Meatballs & Sauce

I’ve never really liked meatballs or sauce other than alfredo. My cousin made some, spicy, and wanted me to try it. It was good!

Rice, Beans and Spice

This is rice with beans and a spicy gravy to go with it. On the side, fried plantains and fish – and some lettuce for color. My cousin made this, too, but I added the lettuce.

Salmon and Shrimp

My cousin made salmon and shrimp with a slightly spicy coating. There’s also mashed potatoes and a ranch and pea dip. She’s a culinary person.

Attieke

This is attieke with fried fish, plantains and avocados. Attieke is a traditional Cote d’Ivoire food. There are some sautéed tomatoes and onions, then a pepper sauce and a pea dip. The pepper sauce is really hot – ghost pepper hot.

Cassava Leaf Soup

This is cassava leaf soup. It has crabs, chicken an more meat in it. There’s cassava like the root that people cook and then there’s the leaf.

Ice Cream

I love ice cream and chocolate, so I got some with whipped cream when I went to the mall. I couldn’t resist! I love ice cream.

Comfort Pasta

This was at the same place as the ice cream. It had bacon and it was so cheesy.

Comfort Foods

I love comfort foods, so I got some with shrimp and baked potatoes.

Puff Puffs

Our moms make these. This is supposed to be called puff balls or puff puff. It’s just dough. They use yeast, flour, and water and sometimes they use sugar. They’ll let it rise before they take it, and its really sticky. They grab it and shape it and put it in oil.
Patience Narratives

Storage

This is meat in my refrigerator. It’s what we use to cook on a daily basis. There’s palm butter soup, too. That, in the bag, it’s very bitter.

Late Night Slushie

We stopped by the QuikTrip and got a late night slushie.

Finishing Rice

My mom was eating, and I stopped her to take a picture of her food. That’s her favorite soup, I hate it completely. The heart of palm makes it bitter.

Spaghetti & Shrimp

My family member made a spaghetti shrimp dish so I decided to take a picture of it.

Fu Fu & Soup

My mom made peanut butter soup with Fu Fu and I took a picture because it looked nice. Fu Fu is sometimes made of cassava, the roots, sometimes plantain. It comes in a powder and you put it in water. We use our hands, and you mix it up with your hands and it gets big. Warm it up, and you eat it with soup.

Peanut Butter Soup

This is peanut butter soup before I put it in my bowl. It has turkey, chicken, shrimp, fish, and that’s chicken feet. They add a lot of flavor. It’s good, it’s my friend’s favorite. It’s in almost every soup.
The project referenced above has received approval from the institutional Review Board (IRB) at Iowa State University according to the dates shown above. Please refer to the IRB ID number shown above in all correspondence regarding this study.

To ensure compliance with federal regulations (45 CFR 46 & 21 CFR 56), please be sure to:

- Use only the approved study materials in your research, including the recruitment materials and informed consent documents that have the IRB approval stamp.
- Retain signed informed consent documents for 3 years after the close of the study, when documented consent is required.
- Obtain IRB approval prior to implementing any changes to the study or study materials.
- Promptly inform the IRB of any addition of or change in federal funding for this study. Approval of the protocol referenced above applies only to funding sources that are specifically identified in the corresponding IRB application.
- Inform the IRB if the Principal Investigator and/or Supervising Investigator end their role or involvement with the project with sufficient time to allow an alternate PI/Supervising Investigator to assume oversight responsibility. Projects must have an eligible PI to remain open.
- Immediately inform the IRB of (1) all serious and/or unexpected adverse experiences involving risks to subjects or others; and (2) any other unanticipated problems involving risks to subjects or others.
- IRB approval means that you have met the requirements of federal regulations and ISU policies governing human subjects research. Approval from other entities may also be needed. For example, access to data from private records (e.g., student, medical, or employment records, etc.) that are protected by FERPA, HIPAA, or other confidentiality policies requires permission from the holders of
Date: 12/12/2018
To: Jane Rongerude
From: Office for Responsible Research
Title: What does food mean?: A participatory photovoice inquiry
IRB ID: 18-435
Submission Type: Initial Submission
Review Type: Full Committee
Approval Date: 12/12/2018
Date for Continuing Review: 12/11/2019

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- Immediately inform the IRB of (1) all serious and/or unexpected adverse experiences involving risks to subjects or others; and (2) any other unanticipated problems involving risks to subjects or others.
- Stop all human subjects research activity if IRB approval lapses, unless continuation is necessary to prevent harm to research participants. Human subjects research activity can resume once IRB approval is re-established.
- Submit an application for Continuing Review at least three to four weeks prior to the date for continuing review as noted above to provide sufficient time for the IRB to review and approve continuation of the study. We will send a courtesy reminder as this date approaches.

IRB 03/2018