From Food to Food Justice: Pathways and Narratives of Young Food Activists in New York City

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FROM FOOD TO FOOD JUSTICE: PATHWAYS AND NARRATIVES OF YOUNG
FOOD ACTIVISTS IN NEW YORK CITY

A DISSERTATION

by

AMY KWAN

Concentration: COMMUNITY, SOCIETY, AND HEALTH

Presented to the Faculty at the Graduate School of Public Health and Health Policy in partial
fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Public Health

Graduate School of Public Health and Health Policy
City University of New York
New York, New York
April, 2017

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ABSTRACT

From Food to Food Justice: Pathways and Narratives of Young Food Activists in New York City

by

Amy Kwan

Advisor: Nicholas Freudenberg, DrPH

With a rise in obesity and other non-communicable, diet-related health problems and the persistence of food insecurity among many vulnerable populations, the involvement of young people in the current, burgeoning food-justice movement has the potential to bring forth transformative changes to our food system and thus improve population health. While much is known about the outcomes of providing opportunities for young people to be actively and civically engaged in their communities, there is a lack of research on the pathways, narratives, and experiences that bring young people into food justice activism.

Through semi-structured, in-depth interviews with 25 young food activists in New York City, this dissertation identifies the key factors that contribute to young people’s involvement in food justice, with a focus on processes and pathways toward food-justice work, participation in the movement, and identity as activists. Analysis yielded numerous findings. First, food and food memories are central to these activists’ past, present, and imagined future. And while there are countless “moments” when they realized they wanted to pursue social justice as a career, the motivations were grounded in broader processes of exploration, hands-on learning and work experiences, needing to do something meaningful, and recognizing the role and impact of
injustice, power, and privilege. Second, this path toward food justice is driven by the unique and powerful ways in which food can bridge and build communities, something that is crucially important to this group of young people. This finding is further related to their identity as activists, which is inextricably tied to the notion of work and commitment, as opposed to any labels or terminology. The work they do is a reflection of their personal identity, family values, ethics, culture, and past.

This study brings forward the powerful, intricate, and intimate stories of young people working to positively change their food systems, voices that have generally been missing from the narrative of the food movement. Results from this study thus seek to inform how public health practitioners and researchers can better support this thriving youth food movement and create pathways for future activists.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

It is with immense gratitude that I acknowledge everyone who supported me throughout this rewarding and challenging process. In this dissertation, I talk a lot about community, and indeed, the communities in my life – on the East and West Coast and in London – professional and personal – are integral to the completion of this degree.

First and foremost, I want to thank all of the amazing young activists and organizers who spent their valuable time with me to share their incredible stories and make this research possible. The work they do, and the conviction and poise with which they do it, is truly remarkable. I am forever humbled and inspired by their openness, self-reflection, persistence, and steadfast commitment to food and social justice.

I would like to especially thank my extraordinary committee. I am truly and forever indebted to Nick Freudenberg, my dissertation sponsor, mentor, and professor, who has supported and invested in me from day one of my doctoral studies, fostering my development as a researcher and practitioner. I am so grateful for his direction, constructive and thoughtful guidance and advice, the invaluable opportunities to work on exciting public health projects in New York City, London, and Cape Town, and for always pushing me to think critically about the bigger picture. My sincere appreciation for Emma Tsui, for her guidance, patience, friendship, and encouragement. Emma spent countless hours with me, mentoring me, imparting her methodological brilliance, and challenging me to push my analysis further, for which I am eternally thankful. I am deeply grateful for Jonathan Deutsch, for his exceptional wisdom and knowledge about food studies and qualitative research, and for always reminding me to stand firm and believe in myself. And I am honored to have Michelle Fine on my committee, whose
support, critical and positive feedback, and expertise in youth engagement and social movements has been instrumental to the execution of my project.

I would also like to thank Diana Romero, for being my professional, academic, and personal advisor and mentor over the past 10+ years. Diana is the reason I started the doctoral program, and the reason I am where I am today. I have learned an immeasurable amount from Diana, beginning with my days at Mailman School of Public Health. She has taught me to be a more meticulous and sound researcher, and has been one of my biggest cheerleaders and supporters over the years.

I also thank the faculty and administration at the Graduate School of Public Health and Health Policy and especially those I had the privilege and opportunity to work with: Neal Cohen, May May Leung, Sue Nestler, Trudy Lieberman, Charles Platkin, Ming-Chin Yeh, and Christina Zarcadoolas. It has been an honor to work with so many amazing faculty members on a variety of projects that have further honed and developed my skills as a researcher, manager, and practitioner.

I was fortunate to receive financial support from the CUNY Graduate Center, which provided resources to support my data collection and writing, including the Doctoral Student Research Grant Award, the YAI/National Institute for People with Disabilities & Center for Latin American, Caribbean, and Latino Studies (CLACS) fellowship, and the DPH Dissertation Research Award.

I am thankful for Simonne Pollini, my dissertation coach, and Sara Ingram, the outstanding APO for the DPH program, for their necessary hand-holding, advocacy, and encouragement.
I definitely wouldn’t be here without the instrumental support, care, humor, camaraderie, and wisdom of all my friends. My DIY DPH writing group – Lauren Dinour, Liza Fuentes, Sonia González-Gladstein, Michael Schmeltz, and Dana Watnick – I have no words to express my appreciation and admiration for each and every one of you. This group was beyond vital, and our lifelong friendship and collaboration is one of the best things to come out of this program. And my dear friends and fellow doctoral students – I wish I could list all of you – but especially Victoria Boelman, Lindsay Caplan, Adina Lemeshow, Lauren Suchman – your constant check-ins, cheerleading, tough love, commiseration, and encouragement were necessary sustenance for making it through this program.

I am most thankful for my family. I thank my in-laws, Connie, Jack, Teresa, and the entire Fusco/Beilstein/Lofaro family, for their positivity and warmth. The deepest of all thanks go to my parents, Mary and John Kwan, and my brother and his family, Paul, Karen, Mikaela, and Milla, who have been unwavering in their support and pride. I thank them for instilling in me their strong work ethic, and the drive and curiosity to learn and pursue work that is rewarding and meaningful. And I thank them for being there for me every step of the way. The importance of family and relationships has never been more realized than now.

Finally, I am beyond thankful for my husband Mike, for knowing when to push me, when to lift me up, and when to sit back quietly and let me be. His patience, compassion, wit, unending support and belief in me, and daily reminders that I can do this, made this all do-able. And Henry, what can I say, your inquisitiveness and determination are already an inspiration. Thank you for your goofiness and sweet smiles and giggles – they nourished me during the most critical of writing times. I am excited to watch you grow, and to support you in all you do.
The author has no conflicts of interest and nothing to disclose.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

## SECTION 1: BACKGROUND, THEORY, AND METHODOLOGY ........................................ 1

Preface...................................................................................................................................................................................... 1

Chapter 1 Background and Significance ................................................................................................................................. 6

- What Is Youth Organizing? ....................................................................................................................................................... 7
- Youth Organizing, Social Movements, and Public Health ........................................................................................................ 10
- Impact of Youth Organizing and Youth Development ........................................................................................................ 12
- Factors Influencing Trajectories into Youth Activism ................................................................................................................ 15
  - Family and values ................................................................................................................................................................. 15
  - Agency and empowerment .................................................................................................................................................... 16
  - Lived experiences and organizational opportunities ......................................................................................................... 18
  - Social capital ........................................................................................................................................................................... 20
  - Community and societal barriers ........................................................................................................................................ 21
- Food Justice: A Social Movement ........................................................................................................................................... 22
  - Overview ................................................................................................................................................................................ 22
  - Food justice or food sovereignty? ........................................................................................................................................... 25
  - Young people and food justice ............................................................................................................................................... 27
- Study Purpose and Specific Aims ............................................................................................................................................. 31
- Significance ............................................................................................................................................................................... 32

## Chapter 2 Theoretical Frameworks and Methodology ........................................................................................................... 34

- Theoretical Frameworks ............................................................................................................................................................ 34
- Methods .................................................................................................................................................................................... 39
  - Narrative research and life story interviews ........................................................................................................................... 39
  - Recruitment ............................................................................................................................................................................. 42
- Data Analysis .............................................................................................................................................................................. 44
  - Grounded theory ..................................................................................................................................................................... 44
  - Narrative analysis ................................................................................................................................................................. 46

## SECTION II: FINDINGS ................................................................................................................................. 48

Sample ...................................................................................................................................................................................... 49

Chapter 3 Exploring Young People’s Food Voices and Pathways into Activism ........................................ 57

- Early Influencing Factors .......................................................................................................................................................... 58
  - Collective food memories ........................................................................................................................................................ 58
  - Impact of food on health ....................................................................................................................................................... 62
  - Families, mentors, and activists ............................................................................................................................................. 64
Paths of an Activist: Narratives of Critical Moments .......................................................... 68

A process of exploration and trial and error ................................................................. 70
Guided through hands-on education and work opportunities ...................................... 72
Proactive search for meaning ...................................................................................... 75
Through experiencing injustice and privilege .......................................................... 79
Discussion ................................................................................................................... 84

Chapter 4 Why Food Justice? The Role of Young People in the Food Justice Movement. 89
Defining Food Justice: Young People’s Activist Food Voices ...................................... 92
A vehicle for community building .............................................................................. 92
Food as a right: The right to access, justice, and sovereignty .................................. 95
Young People’s Analysis of the Food Justice Movement ........................................... 101
The identity of the food justice movement ................................................................ 101
Food justice and race ................................................................................................. 107
Food justice and social media .................................................................................... 109
Discussion ................................................................................................................... 113

Chapter 5 “It’s More Than The Good Work That You Do; It’s the Person That You Are”: Young People’s Identities as Food Activists .......................................................... 116
The Identity of a Food Justice Activist ......................................................................... 119
Activism is work, not a job ........................................................................................ 120
The “practical activist” and “doing” social-justice work ............................................. 123
The teacher, educator, mentor .................................................................................. 126
Becoming an “authentic” self .................................................................................... 127
Telling the Story: A Narrative Analysis of “Doing Social Justice” .............................. 129
Oscar: “Life is political. I definitely identify with that…” ......................................... 131
Gail: the “practical activist” ....................................................................................... 137
Lessons from Young Food Activists .......................................................................... 143
Meet them where they are, but be provocative and challenging ................................. 144
Provide hands-on and experiential learning .............................................................. 146
Shift power and promote a participatory and democratic place ................................ 148
Use narratives and stories ......................................................................................... 149
Discussion ................................................................................................................... 152

SECTION III: Discussion and Conclusions .................................................................. 154

Chapter 6 Discussion and Conclusions ..................................................................... 155
Review of the Study .................................................................................................... 155
Overview of Findings .................................................................................................. 156
LIST OF TABLES

Table 1: Areas of Research for Food Justice and Food Sovereignty .................................................. 27
Table 2: Youth Food Bill of Rights ............................................................................................................ 29
Table 3: Relevant Theories ....................................................................................................................... 36
Table 4: Sample Demographics ................................................................................................................. 51
Table 5: Table of Participants .................................................................................................................... 52

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1: The Real Food Wheel ................................................................................................................ 24
Figure 2: Theory of Sociopolitical Development .................................................................................... 34
Figure 3: Sociopolitical Development of a Young Food Activist ............................................................... 37
SECTION 1: BACKGROUND, THEORY, AND METHODOLOGY

PREFACE

In the summer of 2013, during the hottest weeks in July, I spent 11 days with 12 high school students, ages 14-18, on a large school farm in New York City. My time there amounted to approximately 80 hours of observation and participation. Alongside these young people, I learned how to turn compost, irrigate, harvest vegetables like kale and callaloo, trellis, weed, seed, and turn beds. I watched these students sell vegetables and flowers at their weekly farmer’s market, do live demonstrations to community members on how to cook healthy meals with ingredients from the farm, and do community outreach to tell others about their work. I took part in their daily communal lunch – prepared with food from the farm and cooked by a rotating group of students. I helped with their weekly nutrition classes, where they discussed such topics as the differences between monounsaturated and saturated fats.

During this experience, I learned a vast amount. I learned about the nature and potential of adult/youth relationships, and strategies for positive and negative reinforcement. For example, the students earned points for taking initiative or teaching others, and those with the most points would receive bonuses. And the adults struck that balance of treating the young people like colleagues, students, and employees, depending on the situation.

I learned what draws these young people to farm work (a job; to be outside; to hang out with their friends; their grandparents used to run a farm), their favorite thing to do on the farm (weeding because it’s satisfying; irrigating, because you can cool yourself off; turning beds, which is easier than composting), and about the importance of providing meaningful, collaborative, team-based, skills-based, and most importantly paid, opportunities for young people. Several of these students contribute to supporting their families, and when their first
checks were delayed, there was heightened anxiety and frustration among the group. One young person, for example, was at risk of not being able to come to the farm because he couldn’t afford the subway fare, but he needed to work because he had to bring home groceries for his family – a truly vicious cycle – and one that is common among working poor adults as well. Another student was accused by her parents of hiding her paycheck to use for herself.

When the checks finally arrived, there was not only a huge sigh of relief, but also an immense sense of pride, excitement, and joy at earning what was for many, a first paycheck. The work they were doing was not easy – it was hard and long manual labor in extreme heat, but they showed up every day, to be with their friends, and to be outside working, which were all better options than a “boring” retail job. I was exhausted at the end of each day, barely making it home on the subway, covered in dirt, sweat, and mosquito repellent – and I only took part in a portion of their work days. It was truly inspiring to hear their stories, learn from and work alongside them, and see firsthand the positive impact and power of urban farming.

I spent time on this farm because initially I had set out to do a multi-level comparative case study of food justice organizations. I intended to recruit three organizations that specifically engage young people in food justice work in New York City, through which I would interview and observe young food activists and organizational leaders at the selected sites. The research question was to investigate how young people get involved in the New York City food justice movement, through the lens of food justice organizations. In this way, the goal was to look at individual- and organizational-level factors that influence young people’s involvement in the food justice movement.

A purposive sample of 3-4 organizations that represented different areas of both food activism and levels of youth engagement was initially selected. To do so entailed conducting an
internet-based scan of food justice organizations in New York City. Data sources for the scan included: Internet search engines (e.g., Google), food justice listservs (e.g., Community Food Security Coalition, Growing Food and Justice), food justice blogs, and organizational- and conference websites and blogs. The following terms were included in the Google search engine: food justice organization, food activism, food policy change, youth food movement, food movement, youth organizing, New York City, young people, youth, food. From this review, 80 New York City organizations were initially identified, of which 10 potential cases were selected. To be included, organizations had to be NYC-based, have a web-presence, engage young people to some degree, and have mission statements that included language around food justice. I reached out to the 10 organizations to set up informational interviews, and met with three of them. One of the organizations had recently stopped focusing on young people, and the other did not have opportunities in the summer for observation. I then set up a project with Organization X, the urban farming program in NYC for young people.

Through this original methodology, I proposed to understand the role of young people and organizations in fostering activism around food justice issues. This is what led me to this farm. I had assumed that by recruiting organizations that are food justice organizations, I would find young people who identified as food activists. In reality, this was not my experience. I found that young people working with food justice organizations did not necessarily identify as activists nor did they see food justice as a priority or a goal. But, I will not know whether they later become, or develop identities as, activists or social change agents.

After observing and working with this farm, and after formal and informal conversations with the young farmers about why they did this work and what they thought about food justice, I felt a shift in my research question. I needed to start thinking about how young food activists get
involved in *food justice-related work*, as opposed to how *young people* get involved in *food justice organizations*. Others have explored the latter through process and impact evaluations of youth- and food justice-based organizations that aimed to build leadership skills and empower young people. But what I wanted to hear and understand were the stories and narratives of young food activists, the meaning of their work, and how they ended up on this path of doing social justice work. To do this, I needed to find and learn from individuals who identify as food activists. My original methodology would have brought me to young people working with food justice organizations, but they may not necessarily connect with the broader food justice movement. During this methodological shift, I realized I also wanted to look more broadly at the food movement, and illustrate the breadth and scope of food justice work through the lens of self-identified young food activists. As such, I changed my aims from an organizational-level analysis to focus on individuals as the unit of analysis.

I tell this story because I feel it’s important to share the twists and turns that happen during the planning and conceptualization of a research project, and the continual revising and re-envisioning of research questions and methods that comes along. Rather than consider the time spent as a setback, I see it more as “failing forward,” as per my Interactive Technology and Pedagogy professors. I also wanted to recognize the importance of organizations such as this farm, and knew that my 80 hours of participant observation would have to be saved for another writing project.

Finally, on a personal note, I myself do not identify as an activist, although I’ve long been involved in social justice work as a researcher and a practitioner. Like all of the young people I spoke with though, I’ve always sought work that I find meaningful, and that I believe fosters social change. I was led to this specific line of inquiry after working on several youth and
community participatory action projects throughout New York City, which aimed to foster leadership and empowerment among young people. It didn’t always work – in part because of funding and short lengths of engagement, lack of involvement of young people from the onset of the project, lack of training in adult/youth relationships, and other reasons. I wanted to dig deeper and understand why these projects failed to connect, empower, and engage young people, and learn from those who have already become young food activists. I wanted to understand their processes and pathways for getting into this work, in order to inform other organizations and practitioners on how to effectively foster youth and civic engagement. This is because youth engagement and social justice is crucial to the work of public health. We have seen what young people have done for social movements historically. And through this project, I have been inspired and humbled by what young people are doing to improve our food and food systems.
CHAPTER 1

BACKGROUND AND SIGNIFICANCE

Within the field of public health, researchers have recently called attention to the important role of social influences on health and health inequities. Among the fundamental determinants of health and its differences among populations are income inequality, poverty, racism, and the lack of opportunities to participate in the democratic process. Social movements and activism have been identified as promising solutions for reducing these problems, highlighting the importance of understanding how and why social movements arise in response to health issues.

Young people have historically played a significant role in social movements in the United States and throughout the world. And they are continuing to lead major social movements aimed at tackling rising levels of educational, racial, and economic inequality, such as with the Occupy movement and the Arab Spring. Young people are responding to police violence, voting rights, living wages, the failing public-education system, and persistent racial inequality. Young Americans have played major roles in the Black Lives Matter movement, the DREAMers and, most recently, the resistance to President Donald Trump’s administration with regard to immigration, education, and reproductive rights.

A closely related area that is witnessing increasing youth involvement is the food-justice social movement, a rapidly growing local, national, and global effort focused on addressing and advocating for healthier, locally sourced, affordable, safe, equitable, and sustainable food and food systems. With the rise in obesity and other diet-related health issues and the persistence of food insecurity among many vulnerable populations, the involvement of young people in this movement has the potential to bring forth positive transformation to our food system and thus
reduce food-related problems. The engagement of young people of color is particularly important as black people, Latinos, and other minorities bear a disproportionate burden of obesity, food insecurity, and their health consequences. In addition to building and supporting the food-justice movement, the mobilization and engagement of young people fosters leadership and empowerment. In this way, the impact of youth activism extends beyond the individual activists and their specific issues out into communities and societies, forming critical social capital for public health and health-based movements.

It is important to note that this dissertation will focus on youth-driven food activism in the United States broadly and more specifically in New York City. While youth-led food-justice initiatives are taking place around the globe, the influence of youth development and civic engagement on the movement makes it appropriate to ground this inquiry in a specific time and place, in this case young people in New York City currently engaged in food justice. New York City provides a setting ripe for analysis of youth food activism, given the plethora and diversity of ongoing food justice projects across all boroughs, many of which involve adolescents and young adults. Other researchers will need to explore the relevance, or transferability, of my findings for other settings.

This chapter will review scholarly literature on youth organizing and activism, and an analysis of its causes and consequences. The food-justice movement will provide the lens by which to examine them. The chapter will end with a description of the study’s purpose, specific aims, and significance.

What Is Youth Organizing?

The field of youth organizing has garnered attention from an array of disciplines, including sociology, psychology, social work, education and public health. Given its multilevel,
intra- and interdisciplinary approach, numerous terms, theories, and concepts have been used to describe its processes and outcomes, including youth empowerment, positive youth development, critical youth engagement, civic engagement, and sociopolitical development, to name a few. The Funders’ Collaborative on Youth Organizing (FCYO), a coalition working to advance youth organizing as a strategy for development and social transformation, defines youth organizing as “an innovative youth development and social justice strategy that trains young people in community organizing and advocacy, and assists them in employing these skills to alter power relations and create meaningful institutional change in their communities.”

While this definition may suggest that such organizing is a strategy adults can use to mobilize young people, it is important to note that there is also a continuum of youth participation, ranging from involvement in social activism to youth-driven activism within an adult-led movement to youth-led organizing.

Other definitions include those grounded in positive youth development (PYD), which emphasizes critical internal and external assets. These are caring, character, competence, confidence, connection, and contribution, which are thought to be measures of civic engagement and participation. Public health researchers also feel there may be a “downstream” effect of improving health-related behaviors,” as the cultivation of these assets can help foster a person’s “full human potential,” therefore achieving better health outcomes. Critical youth engagement, on the other hand, refers to the overlapping areas of leadership, organizing, and participatory action research, which are characterized by the links between social inquiry and collective action. Despite diverse theoretical and applied approaches, common features of youth organizing include being focused on youth-driven issues, challenging traditional norms around
power, using collaborative approaches to social and systemic change as well as collective
decision-making processes, and being adult-supported.24

Given the scope of this field, and its potential for impact, the ways in which youth
organizing, civic engagement, and activism are operationalized require more attention. Some
researchers suggest that while young adults today are generally less likely to be civically
engaged, as traditionally defined by activities such as reading a newspaper, voting, and
belonging to a group, they are more likely to volunteer, harness technology for information and
action, and participate in global activism than were earlier generations.25-27 Ginwright’s study of
activism among young African-Americans also notes poetry slams, music, art, gender-specific
support groups, and protests as forms of “nontraditional” civic engagement that ultimately raise
questions about what constitutes activism, particularly among young people of color from urban
areas.18 As Tolman and Pittman state, “Contrary to the popular portrayal of young Americans as
self-absorbed and socially inert, this generation is not seeking to distance itself from community,
but is instead looking for new and distinctive ways to connect to the people and issues
surrounding them.”28

While many scholars agree about the importance of civic engagement as part of youth
development, providing meaningful opportunities can be challenging, especially for low-income
youth of color. Persistent environmental- and policy-level barriers, such as age segregation;
negative perceptions about and lack of confidence in youth;25 a dearth of opportunities or
structures for full or meaningful democratic participation;29,30 and social and economic
conditions such as poverty, unemployment, and violence make it difficult for young people to
initiate or sustain civic involvement.

For this dissertation, the definition of youth activism put forth by Watts and Flanagan
will be applied. They distinguish three types of activism that highlight the spectrum, or range, of forms of activity and engagement. These are traditional community service activities and the provision of aid to individuals; civic engagement, which involves work in local, state, and national organizations and political work; and sociopolitical activism, that is, social justice and community-organizing efforts. This definition has been chosen because of its clarity with respect to strategy and tactics. It is also based on research with young activists, embraces a multi-level perspective, and maps clearly onto food justice activities.

Minkler’s five components of community organizers, which builds off Mondros and Wilson’s work of describing “community organizers as conscious contrarians,” will also guide this dissertation. The components are: worldview/set of beliefs about people/society—a sense of what is just in the world; power analysis that rejects dominant ways of thinking about power; deliberate selection of work; the role of “doing things different” and “challenging traditional ways of thinking”; and the “increasing willingness of community organizers to openly confront issues of racism and other –isms and to demonstrate cultural humility. These characteristics will be useful when considering the actions and identities of the young food activists.

Youth Organizing, Social Movements, and Public Health

Public health is a field rooted in tenets of social justice. It seeks to address the multiple and complex pathways to disadvantage and improve population health by breaking down ethical, political, economic, and social barriers to equality. In a recent review of the World Health Organization’s report Closing the Gap in a Generation, Birn calls for greater political activism and advocacy in public health practice and urges more attention to the historical and present role of social justice movements in reducing health inequity. For example, researchers are beginning to point to social movements—in particular, those building on current movements with similar
behavioral end goals—as strategies for addressing public health issues such as diet-related diseases.\textsuperscript{36,37} This approach focuses on elements of social movements (e.g., identity formation and social interaction) that may result in health benefits and prevention as a “side effect.”\textsuperscript{36} Social movements like those for women’s rights, environmental issues, labor issues, civil rights, and gay rights have historically addressed or incorporated health issues, which have contributed to improvements in living and working conditions and health and healthcare.\textsuperscript{38}

Lessons from public health–specific social movements, such as those mobilizing for tobacco control, improved women’s and children’s health, healthier urban conditions, and the fight to end AIDS, highlight the essence of community work.\textsuperscript{39-42} Such movements have seen numerous positive outcomes, including increased restrictions on smoking, challenges to medical definitions of disease, improvements to living conditions, and reduced stigma and discrimination.\textsuperscript{42,43} Additional far-reaching impacts include the empowerment of individuals with health conditions, the positive reframing of public health issues and discourse (e.g., the use of the term survivor instead of the word victim), changes in regulations through direct lobbying, and the securing of new resources.\textsuperscript{40,44}

Organizations dedicated to positive youth development and leadership for young people embody the beliefs and practices of political action by engaging young people in understanding past and current political, social and cultural contexts. Healthy People 2020 further acknowledges the greater focus on positive youth development interventions in preventing risky health behaviors in adolescents as an emerging issue regarding adolescent health.\textsuperscript{45} Toward this end, youth participation and empowerment are crucial, serving as a pathway toward building sustainable leadership for community-based health-promotion efforts, improving health outcomes, and fostering social change. The food-justice movement, which will be discussed in
greater detail later, is one such movement that warrants greater attention and serves as a promising, relevant, and timely lens through which to examine youth organizing.

**Impact of Youth Organizing and Youth Development**

The role of young people in health-promotion efforts has increasingly focused on the promotion of positive youth development through empowerment, referring generally to an individual’s process of gaining influence and control of his or her life through active participation in his or her community.\(^{46,47}\) Whether empowerment is viewed as a process or an outcome, the term, as applied to young people, has consistently emphasized active participation in meaningful roles and the instilling of a sense of power to effect change in one’s community and one’s own life.\(^{47-49}\)

The potentially beneficial individual-level outcomes of youth participation in social action are numerous. Increasing evidence demonstrates that young people who are actively involved in their community in a meaningful way, such as through engagement in advocacy and activism, have better developmental (e.g., social, teamwork, and initiative-taking skills), educational (e.g., staying motivated and intending to go to college), psychosocial (e.g., having leadership skills and feeling confident), sociopolitical (e.g., having critical awareness of their power and an increased sense of agency) and health-related (e.g., their quality of life, locus of control, and self-efficacy) outcomes.\(^{6,24,48-55}\) For example, one study investigating the impact of youth organizing on urban education reform reported that the young people involved felt a sense of agency about their work, developed critical social-analysis skills, intended to stay involved in activism long-term, and had high educational aspirations and motivations.\(^{56}\) Another evaluation describes the impact youth organizing can have on building supportive relationships, networks, and trust between young people, their peers, and adults. This is often across racial or ethnic and
generational boundaries.\textsuperscript{24} Job opportunities, a sense of responsibility, and the ability to transform and improve their neighborhoods are even more positive outcomes realized by young people who actively participate in their community.\textsuperscript{50}

Additionally, several scholars have characterized youth participation as a critical and powerful process for strengthening knowledge and transferrable skills, including those related to research, strategic thinking, public speaking, and addressing institutional and systems-level changes, such as health inequalities among their peers.\textsuperscript{46,48,57,58} Those who take part in social action as young people have been shown to have stronger ties to their community and a greater understanding of their own health status and behavior. This can lead to an increased sense of empowerment as well as improved health outcomes and the potential to become local health advocates.\textsuperscript{24,48,59}

On a community-level, the media and public consistently characterize young people with negative stereotypes, implying that they challenge authority, succumb to negative peer pressure, engage in violence or other risky behavior, etc.\textsuperscript{25} These ideas, in conjunction with how few opportunities there are for young people to become civically engaged, reinforce stereotypes that young people are uninterested in and unable to engage with their community and participate in social activism. Youth-serving organizations, however, can challenge these stereotypes and shift how society considers young people by disregarding their perception as “problems” and reframing youth as “resources” or agents of change.\textsuperscript{25,60,61} An evaluation of youth organizations supports these findings. Young people who worked with adults and participated in decision-making processes within an organization positively altered the adults’ perceptions of their social and cognitive competence, responsibility, contribution, and commitment.\textsuperscript{60}
Another community-level impact of youth activism includes reform in program implementation and policy change. Researchers have documented the impact of youth activism at national, state, and local levels on such issues as civil rights, education reform, gender equality, and environmental justice. For example, a youth-led community campaign led to the establishment of a San Francisco Youth Commission that went on to advise the mayor and the Board of Supervisors on issues related to children and young people. Youth organizing has also led to policy reform, for example, the youth component of the Contra Costa Interfaith Supporting Community Organization (CCISCO), a faith-based organization, worked to close racial achievement gaps in schools, leading to increases in the number of credentialed teachers and decreased teacher turnover in schools made up of mostly minority students.

Another group of young people in San Bernardino, California, launched a violence-prevention campaign that sought to understand and research how high school students were experiencing racial conflicts and violence, and then collaborate with college students on grassroots policy reform. This led to the development of an anti-bias education and violence-prevention program and an agreement by the mayor’s office to work with the young people to develop a comprehensive, citywide youth-development plan. Some of the challenges and limitations they encountered included the navigation of power dynamics, the coordination of academic-community partnerships, and the evaluation of the impact on young people.

A current example of youth organizing and its community-level impact is the Black Lives Matter movement, launched by young Black people in response to the assassination of Trayvon Martin in 2012 and his killer’s acquittal in 2013. This rapidly growing movement is making visible the “undeniable militarized police occupation of Black communities, the impunity with which police murder Black young (and not so young) people, and the institutionalized White
supremacy embodied in the carceral police state.” It is demonstrating the strength, power, and savvy of young people, and their sharp awareness of systems that do not meet their or their community’s needs.

The effect of youth activism on individuals, organizations, and communities is well researched; yet we know little about the impact of youth activism on individual or peer health outcomes or behaviors or about how youth activism in health-based social movements influences the greater public health. Given the prevalence of food-related health problems among young people in New York City and across the United States, and the impact of community participation on health promotion, youth-led organizing has the potential to address health on multiple levels. By providing young people with a meaningful role in their community and viewing them as true collaborators and experts on the social and economic contexts of their neighborhood, we can build their leadership while also developing more effective, community-based strategies toward health equity.64,65

Factors Influencing Trajectories into Youth Activism

We have now provided a rationale for expanding meaningful opportunities for young people to be actively and civically engaged in their community. The growth of youth activism in education, immigration, incarceration, environmental justice, community safety, gender and sexual equality, and other areas provides valuable lessons in this regard.26,56 However, the ways the processes of becoming an activist or organizer are understood and experienced by young people warrants further attention. Or, more simply, who become activists, and for what reasons?

Family and values

Political activism is very much embedded in psychological, social, and political contexts.66 An interest in politics, often developed early in childhood or adolescence, can be due
in large part to family values. Researchers studying feminist and environmental activists found the activists initially entered these fields because of the political involvement and values of family members, a sense of the capability for achievement (e.g., educational attainment), and life and personal experiences. Another study done on the life-course development of 1960s youth leaders also cited family background as a critical part of becoming an activist (in particular, a left-wing activist), specifically “parents [who] stressed education, having solid values, taking responsibility, standing up for one’s beliefs, and being true to one’s principles and ethical in one’s conduct.” This included values instilled over several generations. Yet another, more recent study of young Chilean activists found that family involvement in political activism exposed and sensitized young people to social problems and inequalities, bringing forth “emotions of discontent, indignation, and empathy associated with their exposure to different realities, and revealing the interconnection between emotion and cognition in civic commitment.” These family dynamics have been found to be strongly correlated with social class, whereby the level of a parent’s education is a strong predictor of voting behavior, which is further reinforced by unequal opportunities for participation and engagement. What is less understood is the process by which family dynamics influence participation within a social context and to what extent parental values or practices shape a young person’s passions or attitudes or serve as a foundation for getting connected with networks, organizations, and activities that foster political participation.

Agency and empowerment

Beyond the role of family, numerous researchers have found certain personal attributes and characteristics to be significantly correlated to civic engagement and other voluntary and political behaviors and activities. Specifically, traits and attributes such as empathy and self-
determination have been found to be predictive of strengthening self-identity and fostering community engagement.  

Developmental phases may play a key role in this. Children begin developing an age-appropriate understanding of the world on a macro level well before adolescence. This includes perceiving realities of their world, creating hopes for the future, and realizing how they want to be involved in shaping their life. In fact, civic engagement is a crucial element of the transition between adolescence and adulthood. During adolescence, young people start to become aware of political and social issues and join related groups. During late adolescence, they start conceiving a plan for the future. Key developmental phases of building leadership and fostering civic engagement include recruitment into youth-organizing activities, skills development, formal education, and training.

Regarding organizing activities, an extensive evaluation of transformative youth-development programs found that providing young people with equal opportunities and decision-making capabilities is crucial for effective personal and community-level change. Scholars have identified several key factors that contribute to effective youth organizing, including the fostering of agency and ownership, attention to self-identity, the provision of adult support, and structures for opportunities. Organizations that link youth leadership development with community development and social change and offer hands-on and meaningful opportunities for action are also powerful influences on the development of young activists. Social justice-oriented and youth-oriented organizations offer a much-needed safe space and social venue for young people to develop a sense of critical and social analysis of inequality, and to connect with others while doing so, thereby fostering a collective identity. As one sociologist noted, “Merely joining an organization will not turn one into a political activist if the context of that
organization does not provide the individual with the cognitive engagement, capacity for political discussion, and, most importantly, political network connections needed in order to take action.” As such, one question this dissertation aims to understand is how organizations generally, and food-justice organizations specifically, can successfully engage young people? What strategies are necessary for getting young people through the door? And how do we sustain involvement and spark action?

Lived experiences and organizational opportunities

From the perspective of motivational theory, several forces can influence young people to move from a stage of low engagement (that is, participating in an activity for extrinsic reasons) to getting them to develop a personal connection to a cause or organization to the final stage of self-sustained engagement vis-à-vis intrinsic motivation. One such factor includes learned experiences. For example, becoming involved in activism is, according to a group of Asian and Pacific Islander youth activists, “informed by their lived experiences of marginalization and oppression” with regard to “subordination by race, class, gender, and age…shrinking educational spending, [and] increased policing policies.” According to this study, the process of activism starts with a critical analysis of their experiences with inequalities. Through this, they are able to move from and create links between “complaints” about everyday problems and injustices to an understanding of social inequality to collective “action” and social justice. This notion of “oppositional consciousness” is cyclical in many ways and can be considered both an outcome and a predictor of collective action. The critical element, however, is the role of organizations and their provision of resources and opportunities for social-justice training and political engagement. For instance, this organization equipped its young members with organizing principles and skills, such as how to “identify concrete demands, articulate targets for each
demand, assess organizational power, develop tactics and strategies, identify allies and
opponents, and produce campaign outlines.”

A quantitative, multilevel longitudinal study of contextual influences on participation in
congregation-based community organizing (although not youth-focused) lends further support to
the importance of such groups. Researchers found that certain characteristics of organizational
settings (face-to-face meetings, frequent meetings, relationship development, collaborative
inquiry-based interactions, etc.) were significant predictors of sustained participation—in fact,
more so than individual and neighborhood-level factors. An evaluation of afterschool youth
programs in Pennsylvania further supports this finding, whereby staff quality (i.e., that
employees are caring and competent) and program content (such as skills-based learning and
content related to the future) were important predictors of youth engagement.

A more recent large-scale study used survey and interview data to understand how high
school youth organizing groups in California shape educational and civic trajectories in
adulthood. They compared young adults from the “general population” to alumni from youth
organizing community-based organizations. Findings showed that high school students involved
with youth organizing groups were more likely to enroll in a four-year college, participate in
civic activities, and believe in social change (and their role as change makers) as young adults, as
compared to their peers. Youth organizing groups can thus have a profound impact on the
trajectories of young people, through the development of key skills, provision of mentors and
role models, and the nurturing of motivations necessary for social action.

Importantly, an awareness of social and economic inequalities and a search to understand
and build self-identity within this context can be a driving force for young people to become
active in their community. Opportunities that young people deem meaningful, specifically
service-oriented ones, are therefore critical for developing and defining a sense of identity. Through such experiences, young people are able to apply learned social skills to address social issues, which in turn helps foster a sense of agency and responsibility. As Yates and Youniss state, “When they participate as a cohort and when participation is encouraged by respected adults, youth begin to reflect on the political and moral ideologies used to understand society.”

Much of this work has focused on topics such as race, gender, and education. This dissertation will hopefully contribute to the research on how food is experienced, both politically and personally, with respect to these issues.

**Social capital**

Putnam’s notion of social capital underscores “features of social organization such as networks, norms, and social trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit.” When applied to social movements, there is strong synergy between social networks and participation in activism—that is, people often become engaged in collective action because of their connections to people who are already involved, which in turn sustains existing networks or creates new ones. Individuals who become members in different organizations can then serve as links, or bridges, between different groups, thereby fostering solidarity and collective action across groups. The importance of a peer network and support system is highlighted in a study of a youth service and civic activism program, which found that a friendly, welcoming peer environment fosters shared experiences, open dialogue, and camaraderie—factors critical to sustaining engagement. Specifically, talking about and sharing experiences with peers helps to foster connections between young people and build individual and collective identity.

Different forms of social capital—being part of an organization or club or socializing with friends—can, however, foster different types of activism. A large-scale, international study
of civic attitudes and behaviors found that frequency of participation in clubs and organizations is associated with a greater intention to engage in traditional forms of political participation, like letter writing and joining a political party. And informal socializing with friends is associated with political participation in the form of protest. These associations persisted even after adjusting for parental educational attainment and other factors. So when it comes to youth food activism, one wonders, what types of social capital facilitate entry into the field, and how do they influence behavior and action within the movement? Also, what strategies or approaches within the food movement do young people gravitate toward?

**Community and societal barriers**

Studies have also found different rates of involvement across class, racial, and ethnic lines, with lower rates of civic engagement among those with a lower income and minorities. Fox et al echo this in their review of the literature, summarizing that young people who are either from urban areas, of color, immigrants, or living in poverty score lower on measures of civic engagement as compared to their white, suburban counterparts. However, these researchers assert that this is often misrepresented as a “lack of motive” as opposed to a “lack of access.” Poor young people of color from urban areas are disproportionately faced with constraints that limit opportunities for civic participation and activism, such as responsibilities to the family, economic insecurity, high rates of unemployment, and a lack of available programs and activities. Additionally, there is the issue of measurement and the myriad ways “engagement” can be assessed. These challenges, however, can also act as forces that ignite activism by influencing young people to “confront pressing community problems and shift from individual blame to a consciousness of root and systemic causes of personal problems.”
Food Justice: A Social Movement

Overview

The literature on the food justice movement is vast. This dissertation certainly does not attempt to cover it in its entirety. Instead, I will focus on aspects of the literature that reflect the goals of the study, including: the myriad ways “food justice” is defined, an overview of the critiques about the broader food movement, and how young people have been involved.

There are numerous definitions of food justice that illustrate the multi-faceted nature of this relatively new, “emerging” social movement. According to Just Food, a leading food justice organization in New York City, food justice is “communities exercising their right to grow, sell and eat healthy food. Healthy food is fresh, nutritious, affordable, culturally-appropriate, and grown locally with care for the well-being of the land, workers, and animals. People practicing food justice leads to a strong local food system, self-reliant communities, and a healthy environment.” Gottlieb and Joshi define the concept as “ensuring that the benefits and risks of where, what, and how food is grown and produced, transported and distributed, and accessed and eaten are shared fairly,” or, more simply as, “justice for all in the food system, whether producers, farmworkers, processors, workers, eaters, or communities.” This last definition moves the issue beyond Just Food’s emphasis on the localized system.

The Institute for Food and Development Policy/Food First defines food justice similarly as “a movement that attempts to address hunger by addressing the underlying issues of racial and class disparity and the inequities in the food system that correlate to inequities to economic and political power.” Alkon and Agyeman further add that, “essential to the food justice movement is an analysis that recognizes the food system itself as a racial project and problematizes the influence of race and class on the production, distribution, and consumption of food.” La Via Campesina is an international organized peasant farmer movement that advocates for women’s
rights and gender equality within the context of “food sovereignty,” a term that is more globally used and refers to “the right of peoples and governments to choose the way food is produced and consumed in order to respect our livelihoods, as well as the policies that support this choice.”

Taking place on local, national, and global levels, the movement addresses diverse issues including economic development, hunger, race, racism, ethnicity, class, gender and health and is closely tied with the immigration, labor, gender equality, and environmental sustainability social movements. For example, the food movement’s ties to sustainability and climate change are apparent through such common goals as sustainable agriculture and local preference and sourcing. Its connection to labor and immigration rights movements is demonstrated by organizations like Food First, which advocates for food and agricultural workers’ rights, including fair wages and benefits, to overcome the negative impact of corporate food practices.

This is further reflected in the vision for the U.S. food system that was laid out at the Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy’s Food + Justice = Democracy conference held in 2012, which emphasized six food justice principles: historical trauma; local foods, community development and public investment; food sovereignty; land; labor and immigration; and toxic-free and climate just food system. Indeed, Sbicca posits that the food justice movement’s close connection to, or “spillover” from, other social movements, may in fact contribute to the wide variation in understandings and definitions of food justice. The Real Food Challenge, an organization that “leverages the power of young people and universities to create a healthy, fair and green food system,” created “The Real Food Wheel,” (see Figure 1 on following page) which provides a useful visualization of the diverse ways food affects us, from individual to community and policy levels.
In public health, there has been a major push to address food policies in order to reduce health inequalities around diet-related illnesses and improve public health. Some examples include policies to increase access to healthy foods and decrease access to unhealthy foods (e.g., zoning of fast food restaurants, limits on advertising),\textsuperscript{87} taxation on junk food and soda, and programs to engage young people and community members in skills-based learning, such as community gardening and cooking.\textsuperscript{97} In New York City, for example, changes have been made on policy levels, such as implementation of the trans fat ban, calorie labeling in chain restaurants, and healthy food procurement guidelines for city agencies. New initiatives have been created as well, such as expanded farmer markets and establishment of Green Carts, which sell fruits and vegetables in poor neighborhoods.\textsuperscript{87} And we are seeing greater dialogue and awareness of food
and food systems, and actions, programs, and activities across the city. Yet there remain tensions, including finding a common goal and vision, balancing community-level change and policy change strategies, and ensuring the voices of those less visible are elevated. More importantly, we have yet to see the extent to which these efforts dramatically transform food environments or demonstrate significant impacts on health inequalities.

Food justice or food sovereignty?

In general, the term food justice is more dominant in the United States, particularly within an urban context, while food sovereignty has historically and predominantly been used in the global south and points to the roles and rights of small-scale and indigenous farmers. In the context of urban environments in the United States, food justice focuses largely on local and alternative food systems, through such means as community-supported agriculture (CSAs), rooftop gardens, urban farming, and farmer’s markets. The emphasis is on food security, access, quality, and nutrition. Some might also include the “foodie” movement, which tends to cater to more affluent populations, with its emphasis on organic and local.

There is currently a debate among researchers and academics regarding the operationalization of “food justice,” and what it means “to do food justice.” This is motivated by a growing concern that the term has become too loosely applied without consideration of how projects specifically promote justice and “intervene against structural inequalities.” Some scholars are cautioning against conflating the “good,” local, alternative food movement with food justice and food sovereignty. While promoting local food systems is important, particularly given environmental and sustainability concerns, critiques are arising as to the extent to which these approaches in fact re-inforce cultures of individualism, consumerism, market-based values, over idealize the notion of “local,” and thus fail to address underlying structural issues and racial
and economic inequalities. Additionally, food insecurity and inequalities have traditionally been framed as issues of access and education, invoking notions of personal responsibility, which ignores and masks systemic forces that drive inequalities.

These issues are evident when looking at the popular media attention on food, with widely released films (e.g., *Food, Inc.*, *Fresh*), books (e.g., *Fast Food Nation*, *The Omnivore’s Dilemma*), and primetime TV shows starring celebrity chefs (e.g., Jamie Oliver’s Food Revolution). While much attention of this aspect of the food movement is on advocacy and protests against the role of big agricultural corporations, its predominant focus lies on individual-level behavior (eat this, eat local, eat organic), rather than the role of politics and social justice. Indeed, the food sovereignty movement importantly highlights and challenges disparate power relationships in the food system, adopting a more rights-based approach than urban alternative food movements.

This is not to say that interventions aimed at improving nutrition behavior of individuals are unimportant; in fact, a growing number of evaluations show the potential of garden- and cooking-based education to improve eating habits, undeniably crucial given the rise in diet-related diseases. And while some elements of “foodie” behavior do focus more on the local and less on injustice or structural inequalities, there are many local and grassroots efforts, like urban agriculture programs, that address politics and are aligned with food sovereignty principles.

That aside, there is a call to clarify the term “food justice,” and be specific about how projects and programs go about promoting justice. This resonates with the “language” of public health, which is grounded in community, shared responsibility, and solidarity. In response, Cadieux and Slocum uncover areas of research around which organizing toward food
justice and food sovereignty should occur (see Table 1).^{90,102}

### Table 1: Areas of Research for Food Justice and Food Sovereignty

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Area</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Trauma and inequity</td>
<td>“Acknowledging and confronting historical, collective social trauma and persistent race, gender, and class inequalities.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exchanges</td>
<td>“Designing exchange mechanisms that build communal reliance and control.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Land</td>
<td>“Creating innovative ways to control, use, share, own, manage and conceive of land, and ecologies in general, that place them outside the speculative market and the rationale of extraction.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Labor</td>
<td>“Pursuing labor relations that guarantee a minimum income and are neither alienating nor dependent on (unpaid) social reproduction by women.”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Holt-Giménez and Shattuck offer another similar framework of trends within the global food movements.^{110} They highlight four different discourses: Neoliberal, Reformist, Progressive, and Radical. The former two reside within a corporate food regime, and less relevant to this discussion. The latter two relate closely to the discourses of the food justice movement, where the ‘Progressives’ take on a food justice lens, focusing more on local food production and improving and increasing access to good, healthy food. On the other hand, the ‘Radicals’ embody a food sovereignty orientation, aiming to change structures and politically enabling conditions for better and more equitable food systems.

There are thus many ongoing discussions and arguments about how to define this burgeoning movement. This dissertation will uncover how young people understand and define these terms, what food justice means to them, and examine, to what extent, their perceptions align (or not) with the broader discourse.

**Young people and food justice**

The issues that are addressed in youth organizing settings are generally locally-based, youth-selected and contextualized within larger political and social justice frameworks.\(^6\) A 2010
survey of 160 youth organizing groups in the country found that the most common issues addressed among youth organizing groups include: education justice/education reform (65%), community and neighborhood improvement (50%), racial justice (50%), economic justice (38%), environmental justice (37%), and health (37%) – which included environmental work, in addition to food justice. In 2013, a similar survey was conducted with 111 youth organizing groups, and found that the respondents reported working on and responding to multiple issue areas simultaneously, highlighting the importance of the intersection of issues. The top campaign area remained as education justice/education reform (63%), but health rose as an issue to 54%. Food justice also gained much traction, comprising 38% of campaigns. A 2007 report that surveyed 41 organizations in 19 states found that 95% manage agriculture or gardening education programs, and 73% offer nutrition and health programs, while only 27% get involved in food policy legislation.

The specific issues that are of interest to young people also demonstrate the breadth of the food justice movement. Rooted in Community National Network, a “national grassroots network that empowers young people to take leadership in their own communities,” convened a Leadership Summit in 2011, where 150 young people across the nation created the Youth Food Bill of Rights (see Table 2, on the next page), which states the following rights:
Table 2: Youth Food Bill of Rights

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Right</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>We have the right to culturally affirming food;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>We have the right to sustainable food;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>We have the right to nutritional education;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>We have the right to healthy food at school;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>We have the right to genetic diversity and GMO-free food;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td>We have the right to poison-free food;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.</td>
<td>We have the right to beverages and foods that don’t harm us;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.</td>
<td>We have the right to local food;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.</td>
<td>We have the right to fair food;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.</td>
<td>We have the right to good food subsidies;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.</td>
<td>We have the right to organic food and organic farmers;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12.</td>
<td>We have the right to cultivate unused land;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13.</td>
<td>We have the right to save our seed;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14.</td>
<td>We have the right to an ozone layer;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15.</td>
<td>We have the right to support our farmers through direct market transactions;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16.</td>
<td>We have the right to convenient food that is healthy;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17.</td>
<td>We have the right to leadership education.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

While the food movement is relatively new and burgeoning, there are countless youth-led and youth-based programs, organizations and activities working towards the goals of food justice, from smaller-scale school, class-based projects, to larger neighborhood- and policy-level community action. I describe a small number of examples below, to illustrate how youth-based efforts concentrate around urban agriculture, community food access, school food, and counter-marketing, all of which share many overlapping characteristics.

On a national scale, organizations such as Real Food Challenge (which advocates for “real food” in universities and colleges) and Rooted in Community (which builds youth leadership for food justice) are contributing to the growth of a youth food movement.

Urban agriculture offers ways for young people to become engaged in addressing local food production and food access. In New York City, for example, East New York Farms! offers internships to young people to work in community gardens and farmers’ markets and attend seminars on leadership and social justice. Programs such as these emphasize job creation for
young people, responsibility, leadership development, creation of safe spaces, and opportunities to help the neighborhood.

Programs working on community food access, on the other hand, may focus on food insecurity and health inequities through efforts like reducing the availability and consumption of unhealthy foods in poor, underserved neighborhoods. In Bayview Hunters Point, a food insecure neighborhood in southeast San Francisco, an assessment was conducted by and with young people to learn about opportunities and barriers to creating food-related, youth-led programs.115 These types of programs reflect the importance of youth and community-based participatory research, and environmental- and economic injustices as they relate to food and health.

Activism around school food also encapsulates many of these sub-areas, or “sub-movements” of food justice. For example, the “Rethinkers,” a group of young people in New Orleans, mobilized to improve school food and the cafeteria environment in the post-Katrina context.83 Together with a local food policy and advocacy group, the students worked to increase local sourcing, availability of healthy and fresh foods, construct school gardens, and revamp the overall food environment. This led to an examination of the recently impacted local shrimp industry, its environmental implications and relationship with the globalized and industrialized food market, thus addressing factors at several levels. They started speaking at local and national events and conferences and became young food justice advocates, their successes due in part to timing, collaboration, systems-thinking, and re-labeling issues in the school and community from a social “fact” to a “problem.” School food activism, in this case, illustrates its focus on food production, sourcing, access, nutrition, and environmental justice.

There are also young people who are engaged in counter-marketing campaigns against unhealthy foods, modeled after the anti-tobacco truth campaign. This approach uses health
communications to directly target the marketing activities of food corporations (e.g., soda, fast food, candy, and other big food companies) to “disrupt or weaken the food industry’s ability to appeal to the public and influence purchasing and consumption of unhealthy products.”

This strand of food activism employs young people to design and deliver countermarketing campaigns, through poetry, advertisements, video, social media, street art, and other mediums.

**Study Purpose and Specific Aims**

This dissertation aims to understand the key factors contributing to young people’s involvement in food activism, and the environmental and social contexts that shape their experiences, development, identity, and organizing strategies as emerging activists. This movement offers a valuable platform for which to understand youth organizing around health-based issues in a very current, ongoing context. Presently, much of the food justice work done by young activists focuses on knowledge (e.g., about healthy eating and nutrition, health inequities), outcomes (e.g., political efficacy and intergenerational connections), and skills (e.g., farming and cultivation techniques). They are also increasingly getting involved in organizing on community and policy levels, and making the links between food justice and other forms of social justice like gender equality, labor rights, immigrant rights, etc. Yet there is a dearth of youth voices and stories within the food justice movement.

This dissertation takes a process-oriented approach to exploring participants’ childhood experiences and how they developed their “food voice,” or how people use food to communicate, in order to understand their personal and political relationships with it. It will uncover the stories and narratives of young food activists, to understand the meaning of their work and the role of food, as well as their evolving identities as activists.

The specific aims of this dissertation are:
Aim 1: To describe factors and pathways that lead young people into food activism.

Aim 2: To examine the meaning of food justice and how young people participate in, reflect upon, and imagine the food-justice movement.

Aim 3: To analyze the identity of young food activists and what their narrative choices tell us about the identities they are presenting.

Aim 4: To describe methods and tools for engaging and empowering young people in food justice.

Significance

Public health researchers and practitioners are recognizing the importance of youth participation and empowerment as a crucial pathway towards building sustainable leadership for community-based health promotion efforts and positive social change. Simultaneously, there is a burgeoning food justice social movement, which has a wide range of goals that are directly or indirectly health-related. And there is a call among activists, scholars, and researchers to focus more on politics and social justice, and the potential for the food movement to reduce health inequalities. Youth organizing around food justice is thus a powerful approach to improving our food systems.

While much is known about the outcomes of providing opportunities for young people to be actively and civically engaged in their communities, there is a lack of research on the pathways and experiences that bring young people into activism, especially in the context of the present food justice movement. In fact, little is known about the patterns, processes and forms of active participation, and factors that contribute to young people’s long-term involvement in organizing. Currently, much of the research on youth development and organizing that is qualitative is more often program- or organization-specific. And most studies of youth
participation in social movements are focused on other movements, such as education, school safety, LGBTQ rights, anti-war, and the criminalization of young people.\textsuperscript{8,19} There is additionally a paucity of narrative study among social movement and public health researchers, even though stories are at the heart of social movements.\textsuperscript{119}

This study aims to fill these gaps by uncovering and learning from the narratives of self-identified young food activists in New York City, and how they’ve come to be engaged in food justice work, their motivations and drivers, their influences, their understanding of food systems and environments. In this way, findings from this dissertation can help public health and community food advocates recruit and develop youth food advocates. More broadly, this dissertation seeks to inform how public health advocates and researchers can contribute to, collaborate with, and better support this burgeoning youth food movement, and in turn, bring forth positive transformation to the food system and improve population health.
CHAPTER 2
THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS AND METHODOLOGY

Theoretical Frameworks

Several theoretical frameworks guide this research. The first is from Watts and Flanagan (see Figure 2). Their consideration of youth sociopolitical development draws from the fields of liberation psychology (which places an emphasis on human rights and social equity) and developmental psychology and combines individual-level outcomes with collective experiences.31

**Figure 2: Theory of Sociopolitical Development**

This model posits that “sense of agency,” which includes the constructs of empowerment and efficacy, and the availability of opportunities for action, act as moderators of the relationship between critical consciousness and societal involvement and action. Watts et al. apply Paolo Freire’s notion of critical consciousness to youth development. According to Watts et al., “critical consciousness describes how oppressed or marginalized people learn to critically analyze their social conditions and act to change them.”120 Agency here is essential, according to
this theoretical framework, as taking action requires a belief that impact can be made. This belief can be at the individual, political, or collective levels – that is, a sense of self-confidence and self-acceptance, and a shared belief in a common cause are posited to play a moderating role between having a critical understanding of the world, and taking action.

Resources and opportunity structures are also vital ingredients for societal involvement, and in particular, meaningful, available, and desirable opportunities. In this case, opportunities can include settings, roles, and people. Finally, the construct of societal involvement and behavior, according to this model, includes not only behavior (e.g., traditional community service, civic engagement, sociopolitical activism), but also the roles young people play in these activities, with respect to leadership, voice, empowerment, etc. Thus, it is not only what young people are doing, but how and to what extent they are involved.

Table 3, on the following page, outlines additional theories that have been used to understand individual-level processes around civic engagement and activism, and its potential relevance to youth food activism. These theories have been applied to understanding pathways into youth political movements and activism, and help to frame questions around pathways into youth food activism.
Table 3: Relevant Theories

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theory</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Relevance to youth food activism</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Life-cycle</td>
<td>Civic engagement depends on a person’s stage in the life cycle and development of cognitive abilities and comprehension of politics. In adolescence, activism may arise from the normal cycle of identity formation and independence seeking.</td>
<td>How do young people’s relationships with and understanding of food and their food environments change over the life cycle?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political socialization</td>
<td>Activists learn their political orientations via family politics, teachers, friends, media, etc.</td>
<td>How do family values/politics influence a young person’s food political orientation?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Generational theory</td>
<td>Activists connect with peers as a result of significant events and shared experiences, thus creating a generational bond</td>
<td>What (collective) experiences growing up bring young people together around food justice issues? What identities do young people share (or don’t share) around food activism?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 3, on the next page, adapts the framework put forth by Watts and Flanagan to include some of the theories above, and to make it more applicable to this dissertation.

According to the life-cycle perspective, for example, a person’s potential and expectation for engaging in activism depends in part on the stage of life they’re in; the stage of youth, for instance, is an important time for building the foundation for political values. Similarly, proponents of the political socialization theory might posit that political attitudes and action are in fact learned, from parents, family, teachers, peers, media, etc. As such, I include in the adapted framework the important role of family culture, health, history, and early relationships with food, as crucial to the development of activist identities. And generational theory, which emphasizes consciousness on a generational level – that is, that bonds are formed amongst peers as a result of experiences unique and specific to that age group – will also be considered when examining identity (and any shared identity) across the group of young activists.
I have also included the notion of “critical moments,” as per sociologist Rachel Thomson et. al’s work, which is “an event described in an interview that either the researcher or the interviewee sees as having important consequences for their lives and identities.” The recall and acknowledgement of these critical moments arise through the process of narrative and point to specific past moments that influenced their trajectory. In doing so, it demonstrates a level of self-reflection crucial to the development of an activist narrative and identity. The individual- and organizational-level constructs have been highlighted, as well as the inter-relationships between these levels. And lastly, the relationship between this framework and my Aims is displayed.

**Figure 3: Sociopolitical Development of a Young Food Activist**

Yet another useful framework is based on Kieffer’s study of activists working with grassroots organizations in the 1970s and how they come to be empowered, specifically, how
they transition from “powerlessness to participatory competence.” His theory of empowerment development highlights the following phases of involvement:

1. Era of Entry – where people start to believe they have power, and the right to speak out – this is often triggered by a “mobilizing episode”

2. Era of Advancement – which is characterized by the development of an analytic understanding of social, political, and economic factors, the presence of mentors, and involvement in an organization with supportive peer relationships.

3. Era of Incorporation – which is when people begin to develop their strategic, organizing, and leadership skills, and is often characterized by the metaphor of “growing up.”

4. Era of Commitment – which involves the integration of skills into other aspects of their lives. This often comes along with the desire to pass on skills and shape the development of others

Kieffer found that activists with long standing commitment generally had at least four years of intensive experience, and that evolution through all phases was necessary to “establish a fully mature participatory competence.” However, what is most crucial to growth is the practice of reflective experience, and learning through collaborative experience.

There are countless theories and perspectives from other disciplines that could be applied to this study, from adolescent development, to social movement, to youth civic engagement, to psychological models. The frameworks and theories described above have been chosen because they are particularly useful for understanding the day-to-day practice of youth food activism, as they help unpack the multiple levels and factors of influence, and acknowledge that activism is both a process and an outcome. Further, the focus of this dissertation is on the processes of the young activists, situated within the broader food-justice movement, thus, the focus on social
movement theory is not as pertinent. The theories chosen reflect that of the ecological approaches commonly used within public health, as they address the linkages and relationships between individuals and their environments, and apply a holistic examination of conditions at various levels. The consideration of contextual factors beyond the individual is central to both paradigms. This dissertation hopes to add to the paucity of public health literature describing the pathways and practices of becoming engaged in social justice work.

**Methods**

*Narrative research and life story interviews*

*What I’ve learned from organizing is the power of the personal narrative and explaining where you’ve come from and why you do what you do and how that relates to other people...and then having a greater narrative of the movement, [and] being able to connect those two...*

---Eleanor

This study utilized in-depth interviews to explore pathways into and experiences with food justice work. Semi-structured, in-depth interviews were conducted with 25 young people between the ages of 18-33 involved in food activism projects in New York City. The United Nations defines “youth” as persons between the ages of 15 and 24, with the caveat that youth is more a “fluid category” than a fixed age-group. They further define “youth” as “a person between the age where he/she may leave compulsory education, and the age at which he/she finds his/her first employment.” I included people over the age of 24 as I wanted to recruit people who were slightly older who could reflect back on their experiences as a young person, and their transition from education to social justice work.

The interviews were grounded in narrative research and modeled life story interviews, which can be a powerful approach to understanding empowerment more broadly, and specifically, the processes involved in becoming an activist. This is because the goal of life story interviews is to learn the “narrative essence of what has happened to the person,” in his
or her own words, and as such, ascribe significance to the experience of the individual, their reconstruction of their perceptions of their own lives, and ultimately “the ways in which [they] experience the world.” In short, a life story is typically an oral, autobiographical story, mediated through the interaction between the storyteller and the researcher.

Narrative research underscores the importance of understanding the social, political, cultural context, and the processes – of an individual’s life, or of policy change. In the way that “considering the full trajectory and lifespan of movements is more useful than a binary view in which a social movement is categorically labeled as either a movement or not a movement,” an understanding of the trajectory from “non-activist” to “activist” is important to the field of youth engagement and empowerment. For example, what are the factors that drive some young people into activism? Do young people move into different types of activism in different ways? The notion of the narrative as a research method acknowledges the “reality that our lives are intrinsically narrative in quality,” and that the biography can serve as an “authentic reflection of the human spirit, a mirror to reflect visions of our other selves.” There is then an interest in what Zussman calls “autobiographical occasions,” that is, stories about lives and “those special occasions on which we are called on to reflect in systemic and extended ways on who we are and what we are.”

Holland and Thomson further note that with respect to youth studies and transitions to adulthood, there has been a particular focus on the notion of “epiphanies” or “turning points” or “critical biographical moments.”

Narrative research can also work to share the voices of those who may otherwise not be heard, as was the goal of much of feminist research. Some researchers view the process of storytelling and narrative research as a way in which to uncover and make public non-dominant views and identities, thereby challenging dominant social discourse and paradigms and fostering...
empowerment and social action.\textsuperscript{132,133} As Riessman said, “personal narratives can also encourage others to act; speaking out invites political mobilization and change as evidenced by the ways stories invariably circulate in sites where social movements are forming.”\textsuperscript{134} Along these lines, the focus is less on the “accuracy” of the account per se, but rather on the \textit{meaning}, reflection and interpretation, and an acknowledgement of the truth (or rather, multiple truths) in people’s stories.\textsuperscript{68,128}

A narrative also has a temporal quality in that it is not static in time,\textsuperscript{128} thus reflecting the life-course development theory previously mentioned.\textsuperscript{68} This methodological approach aims to yield a person’s life trajectories that is further situated within a social context.\textsuperscript{129} This focus on context and the importance of framing the narrative within a larger interpersonal, social, cultural, and political context is key to this discipline. Through this process, we can begin to understand not only the individual’s story and history, but the ways in which they interact and connect with their community, social and cultural environments.\textsuperscript{126,128,135} Through narrative research we are able to learn not just the “what,” (as is often the case with quantitative, or positivist approaches) but also the “how and why.”

As such, this methodology helps address the gap in the literature around needing to understand the \textit{meanings} that young food activists place on food, their food environments, health, and their experiences with food activism and social movements. Some may critique this as a potential bias, claiming life histories and narratives are mediated by the researcher, who has a “vested interest” in the story,\textsuperscript{128} and that the co-construction of a conversation yields wholly “subjective” data. While on the one hand, life story interviews necessitate small samples, on the other, and unlike more positivist approaches, it yields rich, historical, temporal, and in-depth data. Further, more conventional standards of evaluating research include assessment of
reliability, validity and generalizability, but many argue that these are less appropriate in the case of life stories. In fact, the concept of generalizability negates the purpose of qualitative research, as the purpose of narrative research is to understand meanings vs. ‘facts’ or generalizable knowledge. The notion of transferability, “when readers feel as though the story of the research overlaps with their own situation and they intuitively transfer the research to their action,” is more relevant. That findings from this dissertation can be applicable or useful in other settings (e.g., other cities), populations (e.g., older activists), or experiences (e.g., other fields of activism) would be a goal for this research.

The methodology of narrative research historically has been used in many fields, including anthropology, psychology, linguistics, history, and philosophy. For example, Ginsburg, an anthropologist, compared the narratives and life stories of pro-choice and pro-life activists in Fargo, ND. Riessman, a sociologist, examined the meaning of marital infidelity and divorce through narrative structure. However, narrative research is relatively new to the field of public health, apart from illness narratives. Yet this method in many ways mirrors that of the ecological approach to public health methodology. Within public health, there is an active attempt to address the linkages and relationships between individuals and their environments, and apply a holistic examination of conditions at various levels, including interpersonal, neighborhood, community, and societal levels. Like narrative research, this allows for consideration of contextual factors beyond the individual that influence young people’s trajectories into activism.

Recruitment

Participants were recruited through a combination of snowball sampling, referrals from key contacts, and advertisement through two major food justice listservs (Community Food Security Coalition, Growing Food and Justice). A sample email recruitment letter is included in
Appendix A. Inclusion criteria of young people included: self-identifying as food activists, currently engaged in food justice work in New York City, currently living in New York City, and involvement in this work for at least one year. At the end of each interview, respondents were asked to recommend any other individuals who fit the inclusion criteria. Of the respondents recruited through snowball sampling, one stopped responding to emails, and two refused (one because she was older than 30, the other because she was not currently involved in food justice work). Efforts were made to ensure no more than two interviewees worked with the same organization so as to capture experiences with a variety of organizations.

The interviews covered questions regarding their background (e.g., day-to-day life), current involvement in food justice (e.g., definition of food justice; activities involved in; personal identity; goals for change), pathways into food activism (e.g., narrative of how they got involved); and a question around “why food” for these young people, compared to other social justice issues (see Appendix B for the interview guide).

Interviews were conducted by the Primary Investigator between December 2013 and March 2014 in New York City in public spaces convenient for the participants (e.g., coffee shops, libraries, cafes, etc.). Interviews lasted between 1-2 hours. Written consent was obtained from all interview respondents (see Appendix C for the informed consent form). All interviews were digitally recorded with the respondents’ consent and transcribed verbatim, amounting to over 500 single-spaced pages of data. Participants received a $25 gift card to thank them for their time. The research plan (protocol #377174-4) was approved by the Graduate Center Human Research Protections Program (HRPP).
Data Analysis

All interviews were transcribed and reviewed for accuracy. The data were then coded, utilizing both a grounded theory and narrative analysis approach, each described in more detail below. A qualitative methodological approach to this research question was motivated by several factors. There is little literature on the factors and processes that lead young people into food activism and their experiences as young food activists. While youth movements themselves are well researched, the study of youth organizing within a food movement that to date is not youth-identified, is a dynamic for which no empirical literature can be reviewed to develop hypotheses.

Grounded theory

Grounded theory allows for the emergence and production of theories from the data and involves continual comparisons across cases.\textsuperscript{136,140} A grounded theory approach emphasizes collecting and analyzing the data iteratively and in “constant comparison” against the researcher’s reflexive understanding of what they “know.” It is a process that involves developing codes, comparing codes, and writing analytic memos to begin defining ideas and logging interpretations. It allows processes, and subsequently, theories to emerge from the data rather than the reverse, and is, as such, most appropriate for this study.\textsuperscript{140}

Part of the grounded theory approach includes reaching saturation, which is “when no new data are emerging,” and when the data collected demonstrates depth and variation.\textsuperscript{140} It is not just about seeing repeating patterns or stories. Rather, it is “when gathering fresh data no longer sparks new theoretical insights, nor reveals new properties of these core theoretical categories.”\textsuperscript{141} Interviews were conducted until sufficient sampling was achieved, whereby the coding process provided ample variability, depth, and breadth for understanding the phenomenon of interest – in this case, the pathways of young food activists.
Auerbach and Silverstein laid out steps for constructing a theoretical narrative from text, which guided this analysis. The steps are: 1) making the text manageable by selecting relevant text for analysis; 2) record and group related ideas; 3) organize themes by grouping repeating ideas into categories; 4) group themes into abstract theoretical constructs consistent with theoretical framework; and, 5) create a theoretical narrative through the retelling of the interviewees’ story.\textsuperscript{142}

To analyze the transcripts, I began by first writing one-page profiles of each respondent on key elements relevant to my research questions (background/family; current food-related work; trajectory; definition of food justice; identity; why food). Simultaneously, I mapped and diagrammed each person’s trajectory against my theoretical framework, as a way to begin pulling out key codes and themes and identifying concurrent and discordant trajectories. Throughout this process I also read, and re-read transcripts to identify codes, and iteratively identified and excerpted text and quotes to support the development of codes. Some of the codes identified in advance were confirmed during this analysis phase, such as the role of education and work opportunities, and the importance of key networks and mentors. New themes also emerged from the data, particularly with respect to identity and pathways. I wrote analytic memos that pertained to my key research questions to facilitate the interpretation of the meaning behind the codes, as well as to note preliminary findings. From my initial codes, I developed broader categories, which then became larger concepts. This iterative cycle of analysis “culminates in a ‘grounded theory,’ or an abstract theoretical understanding of the studied experience.”\textsuperscript{141} Transcripts were coded by hand, as well as in Dedoose (Version 7.5.9), a web application for managing, analyzing, and presenting qualitative and mixed method research data.\textsuperscript{143}
Narrative analysis

In this dissertation, I also aim to highlight the distinct and overlapping “plots” – the events, people, and moments in young people’s lives that influence their passions and work, and how they navigate and tell the story of their personal journeys vis-à-vis the broader food justice movement. Plots, according to Polletta, and her analysis of stories and storytelling within social movements, add meaning to events, are distinct from “mere occurrences,” and need to be located and situated within a larger story. For Aim 3, I unpack and open the stories to focus on the storytelling. As Riessman asks, “Why was the story told that way?” This means examining the dialogic and performance aspects of a narrative, that is, how the narrative is co-produced between the interviewer and the interviewee. This approach takes into account the role and influence of the interviewer and setting, and seeks to investigate what is, and isn’t included in the narrative, as well as “who,” “when,” and “why,” a narrative is being told. This is in contrast to a thematic analysis approach which focuses more on the narrator and “what” is told. Overall, the role of the researcher is to interpret the story told, to reveal a larger narrative. Additional detail about the narrative analysis is provided in Chapter 5.

Simultaneously, there is a need to engage with the lens of critical bifocality and examine and situate these stories within their broader history, politics, structural conditions and constraints – that is, the relationship between structures and lives (and global and local, and privilege and marginalization) is inherently linked. As Weis and Fine state, “structures produce lives at the same time as lives across the social class spectrum produce, reproduce, and, at times, contest these same social/economic structure.” This lens is particularly useful when examining the multiple layers of influence with regard to youth food activism, as well as the complexities of the broader food movement.
It is important to note that there are countless narratives that could be uncovered (and interpreted) here – narratives about family, relationships with food, social media, growing up. I chose to focus on the stories and trajectories around work, social justice, and identity as it helps to illustrate the different forms of commitment among these activists, and the diverse ways in which young people now socially and politically engage with their community. This narrative of work also helps to dismantle the still persistent negative perceptions of and lack of confidence in youth. The young people I spoke with come from diverse socioeconomic and racial/ethnic backgrounds. They live in various neighborhoods throughout New York City, and engage in a spectrum of food justice work. They participate and identity with the movement, interweaving their self-identity and lived experiences in differing ways. Yet they share a common goal of wanting and trying to fix the food system – through farming, nutrition, gardening, policy, advocacy, organizing, or outreach.

This dissertation will thus first examine factors that contribute to the development of a young food activist, through a grounded theory and thematic narrative analysis approach. There will also be an incorporation of dialogic/performance narrative analysis to examine the presentation and construction of identity and self. This combination of a grounded theory approach with a narrative analysis can offer a multidimensional view of the data, highlighting both the concurrent and discordant themes and patterns, alongside plots and stories of the person, that are situated temporally and contextually. Through these approaches, we can look both at thematic categories, as well as the whole of the story.¹³⁴,¹³⁸,¹⁴⁵
Sample

Of the 25 recruited, 9 were male, 15 female, and 1 transgender (see Table 4, on page 51). The average age was 25.2 years (range: 18-33). The majority (52 percent) lived in Brooklyn, followed by Manhattan (20 percent), the Bronx (12 percent), and Queens (12 percent). One person lived in Westchester. Regarding race/ethnicity, the participants identified as white (44 percent), followed by Hispanic/Latino (24 percent), African-American (20 percent), and mixed race (12 percent). With respect to education, nearly half (48%) have completed or are currently completing a graduate degree, and over a quarter (28%) have completed college. The sample is not intended to be representative of all young food activists in New York City, rather, efforts were taken to ensure a diverse cross-section of types of food justice work, as well as borough, gender, age, and race/ethnicity. This sample is, however, slightly older and more educated, compared to other studies of youth organizers, although I intended to recruit on the older side so respondents would have the ability to self-reflect on their past trajectories.

The broad scope of food justice is reflected by the various types of work seen with the young people interviewed. The participants work on issues as diverse as food access (e.g., nutrition education), marketing (e.g., role of corporations), labor rights (e.g., rights of workers along the whole food chain), food sovereignty, and sustainability (e.g., urban agriculture, farm-to-table). Their roles include education, advocacy, capacity building, direct service, community organizing, and alliance building. While nearly half are involved with urban agriculture or farmer’s markets, perhaps a consequence of the snowball sampling approach, the organizations they work with are diverse in mission, size, and location. All of the respondents (with the exception of current students) have full-time jobs that are food-related. Approximately half are
involved in programs that directly work with young people ranging from elementary school age through college age.

All of the names used in this report are pseudonyms, and race/ethnic identifiers are how the young people self-identify. Additionally, findings revealed ambivalence around terminology such as “activists,” and the desire to not be labeled. In fact, several responded to the recruitment letter even though they wouldn’t necessarily call themselves an activist; however, they “knew” what (rather, who) I was looking for. For the purposes of this dissertation, interviewees are referred to as activists as there was no common alternative label or identifier. Finally, Table 5 provides a brief description of each participant’s “story,” as well as their sociodemographics. As there are many quotes and stories throughout the dissertation, this table serves as a brief overview, or guide, to the participants. Related to this, it is important to note that while some interviewees are quoted more often or featured more prominently than others, everyone’s experiences and stories are very much integrated into the analysis and write-up.
Table 4: Sample Demographics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>% (n)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Gender</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>36 (9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>60 (15)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transgender</td>
<td>4 (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Age (mean, years) (SD)</strong></td>
<td>25.16 (4.0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Race/Ethnicity</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>44 (11)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black/African-American</td>
<td>20 (5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latinx</td>
<td>24 (6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mixed</td>
<td>12 (3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Country of Birth</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United States</td>
<td>88 (22)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-United States</td>
<td>12 (3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Highest level of education achieved</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some high school/high school</td>
<td>12 (3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some college</td>
<td>12 (3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College degree</td>
<td>28 (7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some graduate</td>
<td>12 (3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graduate degree</td>
<td>36 (9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Borough</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brooklyn</td>
<td>52 (13)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bronx</td>
<td>12 (3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manhattan</td>
<td>20 (5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Queens</td>
<td>12 (3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Upstate NY</td>
<td>4 (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Field of food justice work</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Urban gardening/farmer’s markets</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nutrition/hunger</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community health/outreach/engagement</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Institutional food/school food</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Labor rights</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School wellness</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Farm-to-table</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GMOs</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*These are counts, given some interviewees worked in overlapping fields.
**Table 5: Table of Participants**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Demographics</th>
<th>Current food work</th>
<th>Background/Trajectory/Critical Moments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alyssa</td>
<td>26, female, Latina, graduate degree, Queens</td>
<td>Manager of community-based food access and nutrition programming</td>
<td>Alyssa was raised by her grandparents, who moved her to the U.S. from the Dominican Republic. She faced “so much injustice” growing up and became an emancipated minor at 17. Through a fellowship in college, she started interning with different nonprofits, and ultimately found people she identified with, and work that was meaningful. She’s been on “both sides of the [food] spectrum,” having experienced both food insecurity and access to food.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Andrew</td>
<td>24, male, White, graduate degree, Brooklyn</td>
<td>Market hand at farmer’s market, and co-op</td>
<td>Andrew’s father worked in the food industry, and Andrew held food jobs in college. Food was central to his upbringing, and connected to his memories of immigrating to the U.S. His trajectory into food justice was through health – he learned about nutrition and exercise through friends and family, and “stumbled across” the nutrition program while searching for a college major.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anna</td>
<td>31, female, White, graduate degree, Brooklyn</td>
<td>Runs intergenerational urban farm</td>
<td>Anna’s mom was a chef, so she grew up always interested in cooking and eating different foods, and worked in restaurants as a teenager. Her mom and grandmother are intrinsic to her passion for food and community. After college, Anna worked in media to pay off student loans. It wasn’t what she loved doing so she went back to school for urban planning. She took part in countless community gardening projects while starting her own urban planning consultancy firm.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caleb</td>
<td>26, male, multi-racial, graduate degree, Brooklyn</td>
<td>Youth empowerment coordinator at urban farm</td>
<td>Caleb’s parents, a retired teacher and Housing Authority employee, are very politically active and raised him to “always question authority.” His experience with racial microaggressions growing up led him to learn about the history of race and racism in college, and the connections between youth, education, environment, and food. From there, he joined various gardening and food justice projects.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christine</td>
<td>28, female, Hispanic, BA, Manhattan</td>
<td>Marketing for community-based farm-to-table organization</td>
<td>Christine was born in the Dominican Republic. Her first career was in human relations, from which she went into PR for musical artists, and then operations and event planning. A close friend of hers is a chef and reached out to her with an idea to start a community-based farm-to-table organization that addresses food insecurity in the neighborhood they grew up in.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 5 Continued

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Demographics</th>
<th>Current food work</th>
<th>Background/Trajectory/Critical Moments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Denise</td>
<td>28, female, Afro-Latina, BA, Queens</td>
<td>Coordinator for food workers union</td>
<td>Denise is first generation American. She has memories of going to the supermarket with her grandmother and noticing the poor quality of food. In college she became “ politicized,” when a friend introduced her to organizing around the DREAM Act, and when she experienced and saw racial injustices. This led her to pursue work with unions, and she then stumbled across organizations that worked on food justice, labor rights, and immigrant rights.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eleanor</td>
<td>18, female, White/Jewish, some college, Manhattan</td>
<td>Co-leader of youth-led non-profit that runs food justice/urban farming exchange programs</td>
<td>Eleanor’s parents are musicians, and not politically active, but she went to a private elementary school that was grounded in social justice philosophy. In high school she joined a youth-led organization that does food justice work which, for her, “clicked,” as she has always sought to do meaningful work. She is currently attending a work college, integrates work, learning, and service.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Esther</td>
<td>22, female, White, BA, Manhattan</td>
<td>Compost coordinator with farmer’s markets</td>
<td>Esther grew up in a Jewish, middle/upper middle class family, and has been a vegetarian since age 10. The culture of food was central to her upbringing. She started engaging with service-oriented organizations in high school, and worked for a community garden. Through various experiences she began recognizing her privilege and went to college with a desire to work in sustainable agriculture.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gail</td>
<td>30, female, White, MA, Brooklyn</td>
<td>Fundraising for organization that helps young people get jobs in the clean energy sector or urban agriculture</td>
<td>Gail’s family instilled in her an appreciation for the environment and nature. She also became vegetarian as a teenager. She started out as a music major in college but changed majors after joining the environmental club where she “found [her] people.” From here she began working for many different food and environmental justice groups, including community gardens, environmental education organizations, and urban farming programs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Irena</td>
<td>26, female, African-American, some grad school, Manhattan</td>
<td>Works for global hunger organization</td>
<td>Irena grew up in an upper middle class family that valued food and health. Her father was a butcher and her grandmother had a garden and cooked for 30-40 people every Sunday to “ build community.” Irena started out studying medicine but switched to public health. In looking for jobs she came across an opening for a hotline specialist connecting people to food pantries and food banks, which is when she first saw the political side of food.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pseudonym</td>
<td>Demographics</td>
<td>Current food work</td>
<td>Background/Trajectory/Critical Moments</td>
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<tr>
<td>Kevin</td>
<td>18, male, African-American, some high school, Brooklyn</td>
<td>Participant in urban farming program</td>
<td>Kevin is from Jamaica where his grandfather owns a farm. This sparked his interest in urban farming, and led him to apply to work on his school farm. He also wanted to do something “different and positive for [his] community, while still getting paid for it.” He wants to study social work in college.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Karl</td>
<td>21, male, African-American, high school, Brooklyn</td>
<td>Apprentice in urban farming program</td>
<td>Karl’s father is from Jamaica; his mother is from Queens. After high school, his mother sent him to Belize to visit a family that lived off their land, to “experience a different way of life.” This trip was transformative. Karl now pursues work that is not in conflict with his “new lifestyle, way of life,” which was grounded in healthy eating and the physical, disciplined work of farming.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kimberly</td>
<td>27, female, White, graduate degree, Bronx</td>
<td>Program manager for non-profit working to improve school food access and demand</td>
<td>Kimberly’s family “always prepared meals for [her] growing up.” In high school she participated in a “university in a high school” program where she learned about nutrition and cancer, and subsequently studied nutrition and community health in college. During this time she sought out internships focused on grassroots activism, hunger, climate change, and food justice. She also looks to find intersections between faith, food justice, and social justice.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mary</td>
<td>27, female, White/Jewish, graduate degree, Manhattan</td>
<td>Founder of youth health justice program, and coordinator of community outreach program focused on health and nutrition</td>
<td>Mary’s family struggled with diabetes and “dysfunctional” relationships with food. She also went through her own health transformation after becoming vegetarian. Mary’s grandmother, a Holocaust survivor, is the person who instilled in her social justice values. In graduate school, Mary volunteered at an elementary school and saw issues around school food. Her nutrition work led her to food justice, community outreach and youth engagement projects.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Naomi</td>
<td>24, female, White, BA, Brooklyn</td>
<td>Runs educational classes and tours for K-12 at urban farm</td>
<td>Naomi grew up vegetarian. Her parents lived on a farm and always had a garden growing up. In high school, Naomi volunteered on a school garden which sparked her interest in teaching and growing food. She used to struggle in school but found she was more motivated by hands-on learning experiences. She began volunteering and working for various gardening and farming organizations.</td>
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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Demographics</th>
<th>Current food work</th>
<th>Background/Trajectory/Critical Moments</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Oscar</td>
<td>24, transgender, Chicano, Salvadoran, Mexican, some college, Brooklyn</td>
<td>Coordinator for youth-led non-profit that works to improve institutional food</td>
<td>Oscar’s parents are retired food service and domestic workers. He also comes from a family of farmworker immigrants. He became involved with social/food justice (in particular the farmworker movement) because he wanted to connect with his family history of forced migration. He also saw the positive influence his brother had on young people in their community.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Richard</td>
<td>29, male, multi-racial, some grad school, Bronx</td>
<td>Outreach coordinator for community gardens</td>
<td>Richard grew up in a progressive, politically active family. His grandfather taught him to garden and compost. He became involved in food justice through organizing around reformation of marijuana laws. Inspired by books and mentors, he had a transformative and spiritual journey working on an organic farm. He then worked on the student farm and started a community garden.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Riley</td>
<td>25, male, White, BA, Bronx</td>
<td>Medical student and intern for community health program</td>
<td>Riley started a student-driven organization doing obesity/diabetes outreach and education in the Bronx. He is Type I diabetic and grew up doing advocacy, mentoring, and fundraising in the diabetes community. He has always had to be conscious of what he eats. He pursued a research opportunity in the Bronx, where he worked with diverse populations and illnesses. He then became interested in the Affordable Care Act and issues around health care access.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roger</td>
<td>23, male, Latino, BA, Brooklyn</td>
<td>Youth program director for urban farm</td>
<td>Roger’s family was always health conscious; his family struggled with high blood pressure and cardiovascular disease. His first foray into food justice was through a youth urban farming program. He then learned about Latino history in college after realizing it wasn’t offered in high school. An externship that connected food justice to the Civil Rights Movement is what made him realize he had to pursue social justice as a career.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sarah</td>
<td>25, female, African-American, BA, Brooklyn</td>
<td>School food coordinator for non-profit organization</td>
<td>Sarah was an environmental reporter in college, but became interested in food justice after writing about a community garden and its organizing efforts. She then worked on a youth gardening project and with a food security organization, but it was meeting a group of Black urban farmers that sparked her trajectory. “It felt like it was something I was missing but I didn’t know I was missing.”</td>
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<th>Demographics</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Silas</strong></td>
<td>18, male, African-American, some high school, Brooklyn</td>
<td>Participant in urban farming program</td>
<td>Silas was born in Jamaica and moved to the U.S. at age 7. He started working on the school farm because, while he did not grow up with a farm, the environment reminded him of home. He also needed to earn money, and “stay busy.” He plans to study engineering in college.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Simon</strong></td>
<td>25, male, White, some grad school, upstate NY</td>
<td>Completing master’s in nutrition program</td>
<td>Simon’s family struggled with cancer and heart disease, which spurred changes to their eating habits. Simon was also obese as a teenager and lost a significant amount of weight in college. A nutrition class, key food justice books, and an experience farming on a kibbutz further sparked his trajectory into food justice.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sylvia</strong></td>
<td>33, female, multi-racial, graduate degree, Brooklyn</td>
<td>Completing dietetic internship and program development focused on obesity and children</td>
<td>Sylvia’s father is very politically active, and her mom was always food conscious. She grew up never having to worry about food. Sylvia didn’t know what she wanted to do after college, and started working as a personal trainer. She also became vegan, at which point she started thinking about food and health and began a master’s program in nutrition. Work and internship opportunities during school exposed her to food justice work.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Teresa</strong></td>
<td>30, female, White/Jewish, graduate degree, Queens</td>
<td>Manager of community-based food access and nutrition programming</td>
<td>Teresa grew up with a vegetable garden and learned to grow food with her grandmother. She went through a dramatic physical transformation when she changed the way she ate. She started out in corporate media but became interested in community engagement, parks, and land issues after visiting different neighborhoods. She said, “I never had money, so I’ve never been driven by it, much to my parents’ immigrant chagrin…I’ve focused on building human capital.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Yelena</strong></td>
<td>22, female, Caribbean-American, some college, Bronx</td>
<td>College student and intern for community service organization</td>
<td>Yelena grew up in a “very traditional Caribbean household.” Her mother and sister both struggle with food addiction. After her mother had to have gastric bypass surgery, Yelena began thinking more about food and health. She also became involved with different service-oriented organizations in college, where she worked on community food and health issues. This has sparked a passion for public health and food activism.</td>
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CHAPTER 3
EXPLORING YOUNG PEOPLE’S FOOD VOICES AND PATHWAYS INTO ACTIVISM

“It’s such a big part of who I am because all the foods I eat [are] influenced by my family, my culture. But also, I see the bigger picture of how food has an impact on everyone’s life.... It really gets to the root of a lot of the problems we have in our country or in the world, really.”

—Denise

Denise’s statement reflects that food is both personal and political to her. Over time, she has moved from considering food on an individual level, in which it affects only her directly and personally, to the discovery that food affects everyone. This was also true of the other young New Yorkers with whom I spoke. Andrew, for example, described his shift to wanting to work in food justice as the moment he realized “what I ate wasn’t as important to me as it was to everybody else around me.” Andrew used to think of food as affecting only himself and his body, but through his various food-related work experiences (service-delivery, restaurants, farmer’s markets, research, organizing), he now sees how food is “about everyone,” and that it can be a vehicle for addressing health inequalities.

This dissertation seeks to understand how young people like Denise and Andrew are inspired to become food activists. To these activists, at some point food is no longer considered simply as fuel or a necessity and begins playing a role in their politics and desire for social change. This chapter explores the variety of pathways and experiences that sparked an interest, and more important, an understanding, of food justice.

In leading to this understanding, I first examine how food is the vehicle for their activism. I start by exploring young people’s personal relationship with food, beginning with their early memories of it and the role it played in their household growing up, and the relationship between food and health. It attempts to answer the questions “Why is food the focus for these young
activists?” and “What does food mean to them?” Findings reveal the strength of their personal, familial, historical, and cultural connections to food; the importance of sharing and making meals with others; and the intimacy of these acts. It builds on and supports the life-course development literature that cites family and family values as important elements of becoming an activist but situates these values and experiences within the context of food. Although these young people are diverse in their demographics, upbringing, and involvement in the movement, there are in fact many commonalities to their narratives and paths.

**Early Influencing Factors**

*Collective food memories*

Researchers Jeff Miller and Jonathan Deutsch say, “Food can tell the stories of migration, assimilation or resistance, changes over time, and personal and group identity. In short, many facets of the human experience can be accessed through what is eaten, avoided, no longer or more often eaten, and, of course, what is produced and prepared and how it is done.” Similarly, food anthropologist Carole Counihan, and other such researchers, has used food-centered life histories to explore “experiences and memories centered on food production, preservation, preparation, consumption, and exchange.” This approach builds on the concept of a “food voice,” coined by professor and nutritionist Annie Hauck-Lawson, that is, that food can be used as a communication tool, and that through it we can learn about personal identity, emotions, and the “dynamic, creative, symbolic, and highly individualized ways that food serves as a channel of communication…to express [individuals’] views about themselves and their culture.” Put another way, according to Charles Levkoe, professor of sustainable food systems, “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. We use food as a way to get in touch with our deepest desires or to examine political and social relations within society.”

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58
This was true of nearly all the young people with whom I spoke. One of the clearest messages that came out of these conversations is that food is and has been an important aspect of their lives. All of the respondents were asked, “Why food?,” “What about food is compelling?,” and “How did food fit into your life growing up?” The most common responses detailed their personal, familial, historical, cultural, and powerful connections to food. They also explained the importance of sharing meals, cooking, showing respect for food, and recognizing its intimacy. These responses reflect physical, in-person, and daily connections. Building and fostering community by sharing and creating food cannot occur in virtual spaces, and these acts and relationships are fundamental to these young activists. Nearly all spoke at length and with a sense of nostalgia about the personal significance of food with regard to their upbringing and family; this discourse was particularly strong among the young activists of color, and those who are immigrants or first-generation. Two main themes arose from these memories. The first is that food brought these young people closer to their culture and family, and, in particular, it created intergenerational connections. The second theme is the experience of and tangible meaning behind eating and cooking.

Several young people spoke of their experience as immigrants through the lens of culture and family. Andrew is a 24-year-old White male who lives in Brooklyn with his family. He’s from the former Soviet Republic, and for him and his family, moving to the United States was about opportunity and taking advantage of everything that was available. Andrew, his brother, and his father all worked in the food industry after their arrival. His father was a cook and “never missed a day of work in his life.” His most vivid memory is landing in the United States and having McDonald’s in the airport.

We came here, we were very poor—we still are poor. My father supported our entire family by working at a kosher food restaurant. My brother supported himself working at
all these food jobs. I also worked at food jobs, and it took me a long time to realize, but that really was what brought my family together. My mother didn’t let us eat fast food—or she didn’t promote it. She made her own hamburgers. She took rye bread and made a homemade cutlet and put a fresh tomato in there, and made a salad. She [would say], ‘This is better than McDonald’s.’ The immigrant experience really brought me to understand food because food was this thing that we brought with us, and it definitely [helped us retain] our culture and our heritage. And [it] let us survive in this new country of ours. So that’s one of the reasons why initially I was interested in food.

Andrew attributes his interest in food and disparities to his identity as an immigrant and desire to make “the world easier for immigrants and minorities to be healthy, giving them a chance to be healthy without straining them…through food.”

Others also shared their first-generation immigrant experiences. Anna grew up in Wisconsin, and her mom is Lebanese. She told me that growing up, no one in her community understood or ate Lebanese food, and “I didn’t really realize it was that different until maybe eighth grade, when we had to give presentations about what Christmas things are done by one of the ethnic groups that [we were] a part of.” Anna says she was always interested in culture and greatly influenced by her mother and grandmother. She grew up loving to watch her mother cook, and now she also cooks often. Today, many of her friends are chefs, and hanging out with her friends is always centered on cooking and sharing meals.

Richard, who is African-American and White, also appreciates his cultural roots and his exposure to cooking through both his dad’s Trinidadian culture and the recipes passed down for generations on his Jewish mother’s side of the family. Irena finds cooking relaxing, explaining it’s “how I keep my grandmother’s memory alive because she cooked all the time, so now I cook all the time and cook the same foods.” This pride in and appreciation of culture and intergenerational connections was present across ethnicities—Jewish, Dominican, or Lebanese—and no matter whether the respondent was a first- or second-generation American.
The second theme speaks to the acts and memories of making, growing, and eating food. The activists told countless stories of growing up with a garden in their or a neighbor’s backyard and learning how to compost, cook, and grow fruits and vegetables as children. Many said they associated learning how to cook (in particular later in life) with learning how to take care of themselves; forming independence; and fostering creativity, sharing, and community. Gail, who lives in Red Hook, Brooklyn, for example, cited cooking meals with her boyfriend as “our most quality time…. That’s when we connect. That’s when we’re in the moment.” Others recounted family meal rituals and memories of going grocery shopping with their grandparents. Some had parents who were passionate about cooking and trying new foods. Others had parents who were much more concerned with saving money on groceries. There are generational stories of seeing how their parents and grandparents lived, ate, and cooked. Richard’s grandfather, for example, instilled in him a “waste nothing” philosophy and taught him how to compost. “Gardening,” he said, “started with the compost and learning…we all are a part of…the lifecycle.” Similarly, Teresa grew up in Syracuse with a big yard and a vegetable garden and was greatly influenced by her grandmother, who grew up in an agrarian society.

Some memories weren’t necessarily of “good” food experiences. Eleanor says her parents, busy musicians who spent a large amount of time practicing, would often “just microwave refried beans and rice and cheese or something. Sometimes they would eat with me and sometimes not eat with me,” even though they were aware of nutritional needs. This, juxtaposed with what she calls her “powerful experience” attending a “progressive” elementary school that brought her to farmer’s markets and farms and taught her the basic principles of food justice, led her to see family dinners as one of many important solutions to food and nutrition issues.
Others relayed memories of food insecurity. Alyssa, a Latina who lives in Queens, loves food and feels strong connections to it because of her varied experiences: “I’ve been poor, I’ve been homeless, but then I’ve also had a lot of food.” She has vivid memories of growing up in the Dominican Republic, eating sweet beans and sneaking handfuls of rice pudding with her brother after everyone had gone to sleep. Oscar, who identifies as Mexican, Chicano, and Salvadoran, was unemployed for a time, and while he usually prefers to shop at a food cooperative to support local farms and to eat organically, he’s often had to shop at the corner store, where “it’s cheap, and I know I can afford it. Even though I felt bad about it, this is just a question of survival and [of having] access to affordable produce.”

These food-related memories, positive and negative, are narrated in such a way that they provide the foundation and basis of the activists’ current food justice work. Among them all, there is a clear commitment and sense of connection to food that has been built over time and has shaped who they are. The meaning behind and importance of food—in particular, vis-à-vis family, values, and experience—is tangible among them. The process of reflecting on memories also came with little to no hesitation but rather with obvious clarity. Food is also now integral to their everyday lives. There is much thought and intention around their daily interactions with food. For some, it manifests in a simple and clear love of food; for others, there’s an appreciation for what food does and can do in communities and networks. It is also significant to note that these food memories, as they pertain to culture, family, skills, and health, are widespread among these activists.

*Impact of food on health*

The second major early influencing factor is the inextricable link between food and health and the awareness and consciousness that subsequently developed because of that link.
Several spoke of seeing firsthand the impact of food on their own health or that of their family members. There were stories of positive health transformations. Teresa, for example, was 200 pounds in high school. She stopped eating processed foods and drinking soda, and she lost 60 pounds in four months. She said, “I believe in eating whole foods. I think if you eat whole foods…if you have respect for land, and if you have respect for your cultural traditions, you are, by default, going to be healthier.” Simon also struggled with being obese as a teenager and was warned by his doctors that he could die in his 30s. He started exercising and losing weight, but it was a nutrition class in college that “changed everything” for him, in conjunction with reading Michael Pollan’s *Omnivore’s Dilemma*, a book that many activists cited as having had an influence on them. He said, “I had no idea about any of it, and I just needed to figure out what went wrong in my life and how it happened.”

Others had to deal with personal or family health issues. Mary tells of her family’s dysfunctional relationship with food. Her dad was diagnosed with diabetes, but he lost weight, became more health conscious, and was able to go off medication. Roger, on the other hand, grew up in a health-conscious family that encouraged physical activity, but his family still struggled with high blood pressure and cardiovascular disease. Riley was diagnosed with Type 1 diabetes when he was seven years old. As a result, he has had to pay close attention to the foods he eats. And Yelena has been helping her mother, who had gastric bypass surgery, and her overweight younger sister, shift the way they eat and think about food. Seeing the struggles and frustration that her mother and sister continue to go through, has sparked a pursuit of knowledge and understanding of food, nutrition, and the larger food system.

Finally, there were stories of personal transformations with respect to the politics of food production. Many of the activists became vegan, vegetarian, or flexitarian at some point for
reasons including animal welfare, environmental sustainability, the influence of a partner, respect for life, or simply that they didn’t feel it was necessary to consume large quantities of meat. These lifestyle choices were more common among white activists, and were initially spurred more by politics than by health. For some though, this shift in behavior resulted in an elevated body image and weight loss; for others, it was more of an experimental phase. But ultimately, it is the interaction with food on a physical level that fosters the development of a burgeoning food activist.

Families, mentors, and activists

“I was lucky to meet some like-minded people who pushed me in those different directions.”
—Anna

Families can play an important role in shaping a young person’s interest in politics and activism. Specifically, a family’s emphasis on education, values, work ethic, responsibility, and empowerment, as well as the political involvement of family members, can be major catalysts of their becoming activists. Among those I spoke with, family and family values were prominent themes, however, this had much less to do with a household’s political views (or social class) and more to do with the support the activists received from family members and the meaning and importance put on sharing meals and cooking.

Only a few respondents spoke about their family’s liberal politics or former involvement in politics and social movements. When Richard talked about his identity as an activist, he referenced his parents, who met as “hard-core” activists though they no longer are. Nonetheless, an activist’s consciousness had been ingrained in him because he grew up in a household that was critical of politicians and politics, engaged with issues, and showed interest in his views. He explained:
I’ve always had some understanding of the way the system works and the importance of it. [That was] a value within my family: [knowing] that politics don’t matter and we need to know at least a little bit about what’s going on and stay critical about the decisions that are made and how they’re being made.

For the majority, however, the political leanings of their family seemed to be less important than the general support they received. As Caleb said of his parents, “They support me even though they might not agree with everything.” Esther said her family is political, although she wouldn’t categorize them as being activists. Her parents have always been supportive, and, she said, “They never told me not to do anything.”

Several young people spoke about how their family is not political or politically active and that their relatives are far less liberal than they are. But in the end, they said, their family members are always there for them. Thus, family values and not necessarily politics were clear sources of social justice lessons for these activists; in particular, values instilled early in life are key. Such values included being adaptable and open and knowing right from wrong. Irena spoke about learning to be open to challenges to shift her understandings and ideologies. She described instances in her work in which “you find out some of the things that you believe have an impact—a greater impact than you ever imagined—on other people’s lives [and that] the politics you stand behind could be oppressive to someone else.” It is these experiences that call for self-reflection and a readjustment of values. She added, “You have to sit with a lot of discomfort and have a lot of personal revelations in the process.”

Many of the activists also talked about mentors, teachers, and people in their lives who inspired the work they do. These include friends who have introduced them to social justice activities (e.g., demonstrations, events, gatherings) and, for Alyssa, “all the people who picked me up, who let me know that I had so much potential and so much skill and so much to offer the world,” which highlights the importance of personal connections and positive support in
sparking and supporting political action. The activists often spoke about the impact of seeing what others are doing or have done and being inspired to follow suit. Denise, for example, described a college friend who was an undocumented immigrant working on the DREAM Act. This friend inspired Denise to become involved in the fight for immigrant rights. Denise talked at length about the influence her friend had on her, in particular, the knowledge that her friend might struggle to find work because of her undocumented status.

That personal connection was so important to me because I know this person, and they’re going through this, and that’s what really kept me connected. But then seeing how they are so much more than just that, right? It was like, ‘Wow, this is more than just about immigrant rights. This is about racial justice and about exploitation of countries and all these different things that were connected to it.’ I think that’s what kept me interested. It just feels like I’ve always had this feeling of wanting things to be right. It’s like, ‘This is not right. We should make it right.’

Several also pointed to teachers in high school or graduate school who imparted knowledge and critical thinking skills and taught outside the box. Family members were also cited as key sources of inspiration. Mary, for example, talked about her grandmother, who survived the Holocaust and became a therapist to help people “turn their troubles into triumphs.” She raised Mary with strong roots in social justice. And Oscar tells this story:

I grew up in Sunset Park, Brooklyn, in the ’90s. It was pretty rough. My sister was involved in a gang, and I had a brother, too, who was involved in that. He dropped out of high school and became a parent at 19. From there on he had a realization that that wasn’t the route for him, so he became a youth organizer in Sunset Park. He [also] used [his] faith as a tool to inspire young people to leave the gang community. I saw my brother as a huge impact and leader in my life [when] I was 12, 13.

In summary, it is clear from my interviews that these activists have strong memories of and relationships with food. They were not only eager to talk about the role it played in their childhood, but the conversations also flowed very naturally and easily. Indeed, there are emotional, physical, and social aspects of food that were apparent in their discussions of memories and health. Food serves as a cross-cultural and intergenerational connection point.
within their families. Cooking and sharing meals also provide tactile and physical experiences that are vividly infused into their daily life and health, whereas for others, those might be more mindless tasks. Personal connections with mentors, activists, and family members, and instilled values also clearly play a strong role in influencing a young person to become a food activist through support and inspiration. And they now see and use food as vehicles for building and fostering communities.

It is difficult to know whether this is the case among all young people or if it’s a particular characteristic of people who identify as food activists. However, I maintain that for the activists I spoke with, their early and memorable experiences with food were instrumental in their interest in doing food-related work. Indeed, the narration of their stories is shaped by their current experience and identity with food justice, thus, from a narrative analysis perspective, these are experiences they are choosing to highlight and reflect upon in these interviews with me. Hearing these stories at a different time and place, or when told to someone else, might generate and bring up other experiences and memories. Chapter 5 will consider this data using narrative analysis, looking more at the whole and shape of the narrative, as opposed to the content.

From a thematic analysis point of view, I argue that these early experiences, which are common amongst the activists, make up the foundation necessary to the development of an activist’s consciousness. There is also a connection that is established between these influencing factors and what they consider to be pivotal moments in their lives.
“On some weird level, I had always been engaged in food. I never thought of it [as] being this political thing...until I came to work on the hotline [connecting people to food pantries and food banks]...having to hear [the] stories of other people and then having to look at my own [and] having really difficult conversations.... This is where representation does matter...having to have conversations about what we hear and what we see and being forced to shift our own understandings of ‘I always thought this way because my family thinks that way.’ You find out some of the things that you believe have an impact—a greater impact than you ever imagined—on other people’s lives or the politics you stand behind could be oppressive to someone else. You’re like, ‘That’s not really what I came to do. It’s not what kind of person I would want to be.’ Having to work that hotline is where it started.”

—Irena

The previous section made evident that young activists trace the roots of their interest back to their personal and family histories. Their deep, personal, and complex relationship with food stems from family, culture, upbringing, and social support. And it allows them to begin moving beyond just an individual relationship with food. This section uncovers the types of critical, or “aha,” moments and pathways that further propelled these young people to begin to incorporate the political aspects of food into their lives, how this shift in thinking occurred, and the moments when they realized they wanted to work in social justice. It mirrors the literature on pathways into environmental justice and women’s rights that highlights the diverse paths into activism, including through the role of personal and lived experiences with social problems; pain and loss; past experiences with activism; the influence of peers, role models, and social movement organizations; and negative interactions with institutions and governments.\textsuperscript{152,153}

In Irena’s case, she needed an internship while in school for public health and found one working at a hotline for food pantries and food banks. It is through this work opportunity that she started engaging with food on a political level. She told me that growing up, she never had trouble accessing food and, as such, didn’t think about food as being accessible or not. “I never
thought of it in those realms until I came to work on the hotline.” Irena recalls this experience as crucial to her becoming an activist.

The notion of sociologist Rachel Thomson et al. of a “critical moment,” that is, “an event described in an interview that either the researcher or the interviewee sees as having important consequences for their lives and identities,” guides this section. As with Thomson’s work, the interviews allowed for these critical moments to emerge, through open-ended questions that asked for their story of how they came to be involved in food justice, and the more directed questions, when I asked whether there were specific experiences, people, or events, that played an important role. Throughout my interviews, the activists spoke about and identified one or several “critical moments” in their lives that played an influencing role in their activist narrative—a particular discussion or project in a class, recognizing and experiencing racial injustices, meeting someone influential at a conference, taking part in action and activism with friends, visiting an urban farm in another city, working in a community garden, etc.

With an interest in the pathways of becoming an activist—in other words, the processes leading up to and following specific “aha” events—I will highlight four broader themes upon which the critical moments converged. They are: a process of exploration and trial and error; exposure to and involvement in hands-on educational and work opportunities; a proactive search for meaningful work; and experiences with injustice and privilege. While there are likely countless other narratives, these were dominant and demonstrate that, for some, this path was exploratory; for others, it was guided; and for others, it was intentional, proactive, and reactive. It is also important to note that these paths are not mutually exclusive. Many described going through one or all four paths.
It is along these pathways that they began to critically question themselves and the world. For many young people, they offered the chance to “see for the first time” and sparked questions like “Do things have to be the way they are?” The recognition of these critical moments arose through the process of narrative and my asking the young activists to look back and reflect on their story. Indeed, the ability of some of these young people to point to specific moments that influenced their trajectory—that is, the root that inspired their present work—may be indicative of future and stronger commitments, through increased self-awareness and reflection.\footnote{154}

\textit{A process of exploration and trial and error}

For many, their entrée into social justice was through a fluid process of exploration and “chance.” Many came into food justice through other topics and social movements, including environmental justice, nutrition, immigrant rights, racial justice, street-art movements, public and global health, arts and justice, LGBTQ rights, labor rights, the reformation of marijuana laws, the Occupy movement, and workers’ rights. It is through their engagement with these social movements that they saw larger connections between movements, in particular how they connect to and affect the food system. This resonates with Nishida’s work on disability activists, who are disabled, but came into disability rights and justice through other communities of activists, such as queer and feminist communities, immigrant rights, etc. Nishida’s findings highlight the importance of intersectionality – of injustices, identities, and struggles.\footnote{155}

Denise shared how her path towards activism began with her work on the DREAM Act, which she was introduced to through a friend who was an undocumented immigrant. As a result, Denise started working for an immigration attorney. She knew she didn’t want to be a lawyer, though, so she looked for other opportunities and ended up interning with the Street Vendor Organization. She took part in training to work with unions and stumbled across work with the
United Food and Commercial Workers International union (UFCW). It was during this time she “first participated in action” with the Coalition of Immokalee Workers, a worker-based human-rights organization that is built on a foundation of community organizing for farmworkers. She explained, “Seeing how empowering it was to see workers speaking for themselves and being there and talking about their struggles and how they’re changing their industry, that really was like, ‘Yeah, this is how we have to do it.’”

Richard’s activism was grounded in the need and desire to understand what’s going on, and how political decisions affect him and others. He took part in Occupy political protests because it was personal for him. He identified personally with the students; he knew people who were directly affected by a campus pepper spray incident, and he “saw an opportunity for things to change and opted for real structural inequalities to be confronted directly.” He also became closely involved with activism around the reformation of marijuana laws, which stems from his belief in the structural racism that is inherent in drug policies. Through his activism in these fields, he realized his interest in farming and plants went beyond marijuana, and he sought out an internship on an organic farm.

For others, it was about experimenting, exploring, and trying different fields in college and realizing their greatest interests. Many started out studying or working in other fields, including history, journalism, media, and personal training, but didn’t feel satisfied by or passionate about the work. Roger, a former journalism student, said he “wasn’t inspired to tell the news as much as [to] create the news or be the reason somebody wants to do something significant to get reported on,” so he tried other things and started doing community service work with an AmeriCorps program. Similarly, Sarah discovered her interest in school food through journalism. She started out wanting to be an environmental reporter, but a journalism assignment
about the political battles of a community garden showed her “what being civically engaged can do for people.” She describes:

While I was covering it, I was very much still in the midst of doing objective reporting, standing back listening to those conversations. I really just saw myself being pulled to pick a side. I wrote as objectively as I could, but in a sense, it started to feel really difficult to be silent in those meetings…. I just started thinking whether journalism was enough, whether writing about [food justice] was enough.

Through her article, Sarah met several organizers, who started teaching her about gardening as a social act. She then got more involved with and interested in environmental justice. She didn’t grow up in a family who particularly pushed being engaged in your community; for her, it was her “own educational process.” After realizing she wanted to work in food and not be a journalist, she started volunteering with various food security and food access projects around New York City. She met key leaders in the city’s food justice movement; attended a major food conference, where she met many other like-minded people; began networking; and found a job centered on institutional food. For Sarah and others, this exploration process involved networking, mentors, trial and error, and hands-on experiences.

**Guided through hands-on education and work opportunities**

The majority of the activists recalled that their entry into food work was triggered by a specific and vivid food-related experience that was grounded in their own learning, education, and work. It was through these opportunities they saw for the first time the importance of social justice work and that “there’s so much more to food than yourself.” Some actively sought out these opportunities, while others were introduced to them through school or networks. It was through these hands-on experiences that the young people learned the importance of work and learning, now recalling them as particularly influential. For some, the experience was food-related, such as working in the food industry as a teenager, going to a farmer’s market as part of
an elementary school field trip, or learning how to compost with their family. Other moments were youth development–related, including participating in positive development programs, completing service-learning projects in high school, and doing hands-on projects and research in high school or graduate school. Indeed, others went to elementary and middle schools or joined youth programs that exposed them to critical-thinking skills and social justice principles, which they now recall as key to their development as activists. Exposure to food-related work and volunteer opportunities throughout life (from elementary on through graduate school) is, thus, crucial for sparking young people’s trajectory into food and social justice work.

During one of Eleanor’s high school classes, a group of student organizers presented a food justice project they were working on. Eleanor, who had been missing the culture of activism that was embedded in her elementary school curriculum, was intrigued. With the support of her parents, she traveled to New Orleans to live on an urban farm and learn about food justice. On the trip, she worked on the farm and attended student-led workshops about food justice issues. “We also [talked] a lot about intersectionality between race and food and class and food. That was probably the most reinforcing experience I had.” For her, it was hearing and learning from students her age that was so powerful. She also talked about how she saw firsthand the power of growing your own food and eating what was otherwise inaccessible to others.

Roger, similarly, had his “aha” moment during an internship with an urban farm in Brooklyn, which he signed up for because his older brother had previously participated. Through the internship, he had the opportunity to attend conferences and travel to places he never would have gone to otherwise. He took part in a month-long road trip throughout the South and Midwest that involved learning about food justice and its connection to the Civil Rights Movement. He said, “It was that experience on that road trip that really made me say, you know,
‘There’s no way I cannot do something that involves social justice as a career.’” Specifically, he recalled the impact of learning and working with other young people, with whom there were more commonalities and shared experiences than he would have expected. Another example comes from Naomi, who, during a volunteer project in high school, worked on a school garden that was being built in a struggling elementary school district. The experience taught her that gardening is not just about growing food, but also “it’s a place where people can come together, take a moment, be present together…. I kind of picked up on that right away when I was there.” This moment of realization was critical in that it informed the type of work she wanted to pursue.

These young activists and many others recounted similar critical moments, through work and volunteer opportunities, in which they become aware of the power and politics of food and the injustices within the food systems. While the opportunities were diverse—from urban farming to food bank hotlines—these critical exposure moments all occurred in the context of hands-on experiences, as opposed to more didactic approaches to education. Indeed, many cited key books or movies as sources of inspiration, but the commitment to social justice solidified because of experiences that were grounded in practice and experiential learning. As Kimberly said, being a part of youth development groups allowed her to “see people in action doing really caring things that you are just really inspired by.”

Thus, in-person, hands-on experiences were necessary for the trajectory into social justice, but these experiences were mediated by a variety of factors, including social networks, a desire to be socially active, and, probably most important, the availability of resources. Revisiting Watts’ framework, opportunity structures (which include settings, roles, people, and mentors) operate as possible moderators between analysis and action. That is, without the availability of desirable opportunities, young people may not become actively involved in their
community, even when they have an understanding of existing social problems.\textsuperscript{31} Regarding food justice in New York City, though, there are a large number of in-school and after-school food justice–related programs available to young people in both privileged and underserved neighborhoods. These include urban gardening internships; visits to farms, gardens, and kitchens; and youth-run farmer’s markets.\textsuperscript{1} Some programs are more education-focused, while others are grounded in youth development and social justice strategies.

As nearly everyone in my sample—across all socioeconomic strata—named some aspect of work or volunteer experience, mentor, or role as significant to their becoming an activist, opportunities to participate in food justice appear to be widespread. However, one of the tenets among proponents of positive youth development programs is that young people “grow up in communities, not programs,” and, as such, programming must not only address developmental needs, but also the social and political contexts in which children grow up.\textsuperscript{156} Therefore, we need to be cognizant not only of the existence of programs, but also of the type and quality of and the strategies underpinning these opportunities. It is clear from my findings, though, that hands-on opportunities are an important driver toward engaging in food justice work. By consciously structuring opportunities for engagement, reflection, and action, food justice organizations can assist in fostering the development of young food activists.

\textit{Proactive search for meaning}

Researchers posit that a sense of agency is critical when examining pathways toward action, as taking action requires a belief that an impact can indeed be made.\textsuperscript{31,156} The young

\begin{footnotes}
\textsuperscript{1} There is not a comprehensive list of organizations that provide food justice opportunities to young people, to my knowledge. However, more than half of the organizations listed in this compilation by the New York City Food Policy Center at Hunter College from April, 2016, (http://www.nycfoodpolicy.org/21-new-york-organizations-working-to-transform-the-food-system/) engage young people in food justice.
\end{footnotes}
people I spoke with all exhibited strong individual and collective senses of agency. This came out in the way they discussed why they do the work they do and what draws them to this particular line of work. While the exact pathways toward becoming an activist are diverse, they all converge in a common, widespread, and primary motive: to have a job that is meaningful and satisfying and what they’re passionate about. This sentiment is central to the vast majority, who said they did not want a “typical” desk job, but rather more hands-on, interactive, and community-based work. It is about their strong ties and connections to their communities and their desire to work within them. They are, therefore, intrinsically motivated by the work to be done (and its values and ethics), as opposed to any external benefits (e.g., money) that might come with a job. For example, Yelena’s motivation and interest in public health stems from a sense of collective responsibility, as for her, “There’s no denying that you’re meant to advocate for certain populations.”

Among all the activists I spoke with, there was a strong desire to help fix and improve what they viewed as failed systems. I argue this represents a form of political efficacy, in that this active search for meaningful work demonstrates a belief in their own capacity to effect change. Roger summarizes this nicely:

I always felt like your job and your mission should always be to work for things that are most personal to you…. I see my neighborhood, and I want it to be better. I want it to be a happier place. I don’t want to walk down the street and keep hearing struggle stories…. I want to hear a story that’s like, ‘Oh, wow, I did this, and this was really good, and this is happy for me, I’m so great, I can’t believe it….’ Most of my family still lives [here]…so it’s like, all right, let me try and make them proud here.

Roger had several moments critical to his activism: He interned on an urban farm during high school and learned about food justice and the Civil Rights Movement, and he sought to learn about his family culture and history in college because Latino history wasn’t offered in high school. He had hands-on relevant work experiences, recognized injustices in his upbringing
and neighborhood, and had mentors that guided and supported him. He pointed to these moments as critical to the development of his identity and as sparking his interest in social justice work. His conviction to “try” demonstrates a sense of agency and that he wants to and can effect change. Combined with the opportunity structures made available in his neighborhood, he actively sought to take action.

We see this, too, with Alyssa, who was determined to be educated and to contribute to the world. She originally wanted to be a lawyer because she “wanted to get out of poverty.” She was, however, disheartened with her first job—“fancy title, terrible pay, terrible hours”—but primarily she felt she could be doing work that was bettering the community and quickly sought to do “something good.” She landed in the field of food, working in a community she cares about. She went on to explain how her work is “really meaningful”:

It’s very satisfying. The people you meet along the way are just wonderful, real lifelong contacts…. I like to do work where I feel like I’m making a difference, where I feel like I’m doing something that’s actually needed, that, you know, if this issue were eradicated we’d have a better world.

This goes hand in hand with a high level of commitment, even an avowed lifelong one, to this type of work. Eleanor chose to attend one of the seven federally recognized work colleges, where students perform essential functions for the college (e.g., janitorial, accounts receivable, admissions, environmental). Students are paid a living wage, which is credited toward the cost of their education. Eleanor chose a work college because of her discontent in high school with the people around her who were not engaged in the community or with what they were doing, so she sought a school where students “value work just as much as they value academics.” When she considers her future, she said she gets “anxious about the environmental future…. I don’t think I will be able to be very happy if I’m not fighting for something I care about.” She explained:
I’d gone to this really intense academic high school, where everyone had kind of a vision of where they’re going to go—study business, going to get a job, whatever. I think letting go of that was a really big part of my transformation as an activist, in being like, ‘It’s okay if other people are doing the mainstream thing….’ I can’t live a day when I don’t think about important things to me. It doesn’t make me happy. Obviously, in a sense I need to be realistic and make sure I have money to support myself and, if I do choose to have a family, support my family. At the same time, I’m not going to be happy in any other job, not being active and not stating how I feel.

Others echoed this sentiment: They are willing to make sacrifices (e.g., financially) in order to do work that has value and that “does good for the world.” This means not working in conventional supermarkets, as in Andrew’s case, or not doing work they aren’t passionate about or personally connected to. Caleb described:

A lot of my deep personal feelings about social justice have to do with issues of self-determination of communities, of mutual aid, of people in communities having the means and the ability to live a good life and feel safe and to do that in a way that’s not destroying their environment.

And for a few of these activists, there is an element of anger that drives them to this line of work. Caleb described being angry about the lack of discussion about the history of race and racism in high school, which fueled his trajectory into social justice and desire to become a teacher. Simon, on the other hand, is actively involved in the fight against big corporations with respect to genetically modified organisms (GMOs). He said, “I viewed these companies, the poster boy being Monsanto…as the ultimate bully who is hurting animals…and food which directly affects me and everybody else.” For Simon, this sentiment stems from being bullied in high school for being overweight. “I kind of identify myself as an angry person. Everybody views that badly, but if you’re not furious at something, you are ignoring something.” The vast majority, however, did not explicitly bring up anger as a major source of motivation. They were vocal about their deep-seated frustration with the injustices within the food system, but the
narratives were centered more around and driven by passion, interest, and a need to do something about food access and food sovereignty.

That their identity is shaped by their work is clear among these young activists. This intentionality—to be proactive, connect with, and learn from communities and people to promote social change—demonstrates a form of political efficacy. As Roger said, “I’m being more conscious in my personal life, with my family, with everyone that I love, to really live the lifestyle that I want to see be lived.”

*Through experiencing injustice and privilege*

“Food does affect me personally, but it’s deeply ingrained in my roots and my history,” said Oscar. Oscar’s parents’ history with forced migration and his brother’s involvement with gangs and later feeling of pressure to work in a corporate industry to make a living are the main reasons food justice is so important to him and why he is so passionate about the work. His experience with injustice and desire to connect with his personal history through food was paramount. In line with Soo Ah Kwon’s research on youth activism and social movements, almost half of the young people I spoke with revealed that their work is informed by their lived experiences of injustice and racism. This also echoes Kieffer’s first stage of empowerment, which posits that the initiation of action starts with “tangible and direct threats to individual or familial self-interests.” This personal experience with race and racism, be it “tangible and direct” or not, plays a strong role in shaping their decisions to engage in social justice work. It is through their lived experiences that they begin to understand social inequalities and, in turn, incorporate social justice into their life. And, ultimately, they see food as a lens through which to critically understand race and racism and a platform for taking action and tackling inequalities.
These encounters were grounded in their connection to their personal history and fueled their pursuit of knowledge, information, and political action. Denise, who is Afro-Latina, shared that she grew up being aware of racism, but it wasn’t until she was older that she began recognizing and experiencing racial prejudice and profiling. She recounted specific experiences—for example, when someone on the street told her to go back to her country and times when she would be blatantly treated differently from her white boyfriend. The recognition of these experiences and her increased awareness led her to “become politicized” in college and heavily involved, first with action around the DREAM Act, then immigrant rights and student rights. Caleb, who is multiracial, had been confronted with “microaggressions that come with being racially ambiguous and people wanting to fit you in a box” in middle school. He connected these experiences with his pursuit of a major in African studies in college in order to learn more about the history of race and racism.

A similar example can be seen with Roger, a Latino who realized in college that he never learned about Latino history while in the New York City public school system. Like Caleb, he took it upon himself to take relevant courses in college, and it was his professors and certain books that “really gave me that consciousness…like, oh, this is why you should do that.” He subsequently wanted to find work that reconnected him with his personal history and is now passionate about improving the standard of living in his community. Specifically, Roger’s interest in food comes from his experience with his family’s struggles with health problems and his seeing the pervasiveness of diet-related health issues in his neighborhood. His work fuses prevention strategies, the transfer of power, and “taking back your food system.” His goal is to “help people see that where we live is not a horrible place, and that we could take better responsibility of taking care of it ourselves…making sure that we really take ownership of our
For him, social justice is “an angle to try and take power back to the community that’s been denied it…and taking ownership back over not only your own life, but your community health and community life—and the whole neighborhood.”

Another related theme that came up repeatedly is the importance of real community representation and visibility and the power of role models and mentors. Sarah’s critical moments include paths of exploration and hands-on work. As described earlier, she was initially interested in environmental journalism, but through a story she was working on, she learned about and became much more interested in urban gardening and social justice. She started volunteering for food justice projects and subsequently went to a food justice conference.

There were all these black women from all different walks of life talking about food. They all were working in food…whether it was running community gardens for their day jobs. It felt like it was something I was missing, but I didn’t know I was missing. I’m very used to being in spaces and being the only black person there or one of the few…. I was just like, ‘Oh my god. I’ve never met any person that I ever said, “I want to be you….”’ I’ve never met a real model….’ Now these women…were just all really powerful in their own way—people who are more forceful, people who have a quiet confidence, people who were really creative…. If you see someone who is like you doing the work, it’s really helpful to see yourself doing that type of work.

For many of the young activists of color, their experiences allowed them to become more aware of what is at stake and who is disproportionately affected by food and food inequalities.

While much public health research has focused on the experiences of underserved and marginalized populations, there is also a growing need to understand the role of privilege, particularly in the trajectories and experiences of young activists. Survey-based research conducted by Flanagan and Tucker, for example, found that young people from more privileged communities were, in fact, more likely to identify systemic- and structural-level causes of unemployment, poverty, and homelessness, while those from less privileged communities focused more on individual-level causes. While there was no clear association between
disadvantage and individual-oriented views of society in this sample of young food activists, a quarter of the participants, who identify as white, mixed, or African-American, talked specifically about their recognition of privilege and the moment they realized and “saw” their privilege. It was through these moments that they were able to observe stark differences and injustices, which then fueled their paths into social justice work.

When I asked Esther, a white woman who works with farmer’s markets, to talk about the experience that shaped her interest in food justice, she brought up the time when she went to South America to build a school when she was 16 years old. During this experience, she found it most noteworthy to be able to speak directly with and connect to the community members. She described:

*The most powerful part for me personally was for the first time, [I had] a real understanding of my own privilege, also the understanding of a basic human connection with people even though our lives are unfathomably different—that we still have things to share with each other.*

For Eleanor, when talking about where her activism comes from, she acknowledged that for many activists, it comes from a place of trauma or other very personal reasons. But for her, “I was always trying to find that reason…. I guess it clicked for me somehow, and I’m a compassionate person. I don’t feel happy when I’m not doing this.” Eleanor’s activism comes from realizing what she was “so privileged to have experienced” in school. After attending what she calls progressive elementary and middle schools, she yearned to experience a “traditional education.” She went to a “traditional” high school, where she saw “no discussion, no activism.” She realized she missed the interactive education she was exposed to in elementary and middle school and the chance to engage with other students about issues that matter to them. It was at this juncture that she realized and recognized her privilege. The organization she now runs is, as a result, aimed at providing opportunities for more privileged students to have an “eye-opening
experience.” While this was uncomfortable for her at first, she realized that the firsthand experience of meeting other students “who are living completely polar opposite lives” was a strategy for getting privileged students to understand and see their privilege—and then to hopefully do something with this experience. However, as Guthman remarks, these students may be changed by their experience, although they may not, in the end, contribute to changing the system; nonetheless, it underscores the importance of experiential learning.100

Still, a few others said they grew up middle or upper middle class, were part of a family who always prepared meals for them, or never experienced food insecurity. It’s when they had other experiences, either through work, going to college, or meeting people, that they then saw where differences and inequalities can lie.

That a quarter of the young activists talked specifically about their recognition of privilege is particularly noteworthy in the context of the food justice movement, given criticisms that community food movements in general, and the spaces they occupy, are more often “coded” as “white,” with little acknowledgment of white privilege.103,158 However, while many alternative food spaces may still be dominated by “white space,” this sub sample of young people demonstrate a level of reflexivity regarding their social position. This may in fact be due to education and income, or family values, and the extent to which values around self-reliance versus social responsibility are emphasized.157 Further discussion of their analysis of the food justice movement vis-à-vis race will be presented in Chapter 4.

Thus, for many of these activists, the reason they do what they do is that they’re fueled by experiences of injustice and trauma. They’ve experienced firsthand the inequalities in the world and in their lives and want to do something about it. For others, they are able to see these inequalities but don’t experience them directly. And for some, the notion of injustice or privilege
doesn’t come up explicitly in conversation at all. Instead, their narrative incorporates more language about helping others on a service-oriented level. These experiences with injustice and privilege are “critical moments” and also demonstrate the development of critical consciousness through the awareness of oppression and systemic inequalities. How this plays out with respect to the food justice movement will be explored further in the following chapter.

It is important to note that for a few, there was less certainty about their pathways to social justice. In particular, those who were newer to the field of food justice, or didn’t have as strong of an identification with the movement, worked harder to recall specific moments that propelled them into their line of work. In general, there was more hesitancy in their discussion of why they do what they do. Riley, for example, talked about being diagnosed with Type 1 diabetes and his struggles with health insurance as being important to his desire to be a doctor with a focus on community health. But there was less conviction in the telling of his story. This is likely due more to the fact that for him and others, this interview served as the first time they had to reflect back on their journey and share their story. In fact, what caught me by surprise during these interviews was how at the end, nearly everyone made remarks such as, “This was really great, I’ve never had to tell my story before,” or “Thank you, I’ve never really thought about all of this before.” Only two people specifically referenced previous experiences sharing their “activist narrative” or “journey” as part of their work. As such, the vast majority were simultaneously co-constructing and working through their narrative with me.

Discussion

Alyssa is 26 years old, Latina, and does community outreach and nutrition education in the South Bronx for a food security non-profit. She told me that she had a “very special place in [her] heart for the [Bronx],” which I asked to hear more about. She responded with this story:
I come from a very broken family. I come from a very broken home. I don’t ever remember it being anything other than what it is. I call my [grandparents my] mom and my dad. I still have my father, but… it’s a very difficult situation. [I was born in Harlem but] I grew up in the Dominican Republic and I was one of those hungry kids. I was really skinny. You could see my ribs. I went to a little patio school and my lunch was these crackers that they sell at Dominican bodegas. It was a dirt backyard and that’s where you went to school. Don’t get me wrong, [it was] the best education I’ve ever had. In these countries, Jamaica, all these Caribbean countries and all these African countries, [they] will offer you the best top-notch education, [but] with very limited opportunities if you choose to pursue college. Your gender, environment and because of money and all of those things combined, equal very stunted, limited mobility. So I grew up in a place where kids didn’t take for granted things like food and school and clothes and all those things…

This quote illustrates how Alyssa’s current work is firmly rooted in and connected to her personal history. That she chose to talk about her upbringing when I asked why she works in the Bronx demonstrates that her pursuit of community-based food work is intrinsically and personally motivated. Alyssa continued to explain that her grandmother brought her and her siblings to the United States from the Dominican Republic where she quickly learned English and “was determined to be educated…determined to be somebody….determined to be a good person and to do good for others because I wouldn’t be here if it weren’t for people who did the same for me.” She said, “I ha[ve] been through so much injustice. I’ve internalized my struggle and put it toward my work.” Indeed, her desire to work in food comes from experiencing both ends of the spectrum, from “having to live on ramen noodles because I didn’t have money for anything else, and then seeing myself blow up due to medication and stress and depression and poor eating habits.” Alyssa has plans to pursue a Ph.D. in public health, with a focus on homelessness, violence, and addiction, all of which she has personally experienced in her life.

Alyssa’s story exemplifies the significance of early influencing factors and the various streams, or pathways, by which young people become activists. The young activists I spoke with all pointed to early and strong food memories, their direct connection to health, family values,
and key mentors and people in their lives as a backdrop to their critical moments. These individual-level factors acted as foundations to their pathways into social justice. This is because, according to the interviewees, food is tangible and pervasive; it is personal, social, political, and widespread. They’ve been shaped by the values of their family, the support they’ve received from family members, and the meaning and importance they and their family put on sharing meals and cooking. Food was central to the lives of these young people growing up. It was talked about, thought about, and learned about, and it was a meaningful part of their daily existence beyond its face value. As such, they saw how food could be used to bring people together, to build communities. Further, and important, food is emotional. The young activists’ memories and stories of food were grounded in emotion and feeling.

Among these activists, there were four main overlapping narratives around how they became involved in food justice. Many described processes of exploring different fields, figuring out what they were interested in, and trial and error. Others recounted specific hands-on learning and work experiences—internships, visits to farms, work—that solidified the path. This is demonstrated here and by the literature, whereby work and volunteer opportunities develop and foster agency, reflection, and self-identity, and offer a strong influence on the development of young activists.\textsuperscript{25,56,73} It also underscores the importance of community resources, such as internships and youth programs, that teach practical skills and critical thinking and incorporate history and the history of social movements to advance social justice. There were also those who knew they wanted to do something meaningful, which is in line with current research that finds that millennials (people born between 1980 and the early 2000s) increasingly want to work for organizations that have a positive impact on the world and are more focused on their community
and becoming leaders there.\(^{159,160}\) And lastly, there were a majority who pursued social justice after personal experiences with injustice or the recognition of their own privilege.

It’s important to note that no one had only one path; the process of becoming a food activist entailed a combination of several, if not all of, these narratives. This resonates with other research that illustrates the many pathways toward reaching a level of critical consciousness.\(^{75,161}\) And it is through these experiences, they begin to see food as a tool for understanding the world, different cultures, and societal challenges, and for nearly all, how food can be a useful lens for examining race and class, racial discrimination, and inequalities underlying the food system.

These realizations also demonstrate the beginning of a shift in identity, in which young people are becoming more comfortable with themselves and wanting to pursue work that reflects their values and perspectives. It is possible that the early life experiences described above were key to creating a “grounds,” or foundation, that is then activated or spurred by a variety of critical moments and sustained by interest, passion, beliefs, values, and knowledge. Many made remarks along the lines of “now looking back….” Gail, for example, said, “In college I ate food like noodles with the little pack and sauce in a box, cooking meals… where I felt like I was really cooking for the first time. But now looking back, I’m like, ugh, that was terrible.” She continued, “My mom was a good cook, but we bought it all at the grocery store. I never thought about where it came from, except meat, so it wasn’t until I took [a] class in college…that I really thought about [food] as a system that has so much potential to impact everything.” These critical moments allow them to reflect back on what food was like for them growing up.

For these young activists, engagement in food justice work enables a process of self-reflection and reflection on their past relationships with and memories of food. Among my sample, there were few differences, if any, by class or race, with regard to pathways to
involvement in food justice. Lyson, in her research on narratives of urban agriculture activists, found differences by education, where more highly educated activists had motivations grounded in higher education learning opportunities, and those with lower education were inspired by family histories of growing food. Differences by education would not be apparent in this study as the sample is predominantly highly educated. The small number of respondents with only a high school diploma or some college are currently in high school or college – and intend to pursue a college degree. The remaining respondents all have a college degree or higher. In general, even across socio-demographics and types of work, the narratives shared more similarities than expected. There were common ground and shared collective experiences. The spectrum is greater, as we will see in the next chapter, when examining their understanding of and participation in the food movement.
CHAPTER 4

WHY FOOD JUSTICE?

THE ROLE OF YOUNG PEOPLE IN THE FOOD JUSTICE MOVEMENT

“Everybody eats differently, even within their own cultures. And people eat for different reasons, and they like to eat different things. Food is something you can be curious about, and I think that curiosity fuels understanding. So when I think about how important community and community integration and cohesion [are], not just to solve the poverty problem but really in how we as human beings function as a race of beings...food is the central point of that. Food has fueled the development of different types of growing and gathering, and using food has fueled all of human evolution. So that’s why food, because inherently it’s not just what I ate for breakfast this morning, but it has so many facets [and] connections to so many larger and super-interesting things. That’s why food.”

—Anna

With an understanding of the variety of pathways and experiences that sparked their interest in social justice, this chapter explores in more depth why young food activists chose food justice and what food justice means to them. For example, Anna runs an intergenerational urban-farming program that is community-run and –owned and works toward building community cohesion. In her statement above, she explained that food justice is significant to her because of its impact beyond the individual, and that food can be a strong vehicle for collective action. I am interested in how Anna and others understand, imagine, and critically reflect on food justice and its broader movement. Further, within the movement, there is an increased push among food justice scholars to acknowledge oppression and systemic inequalities in order to make positive social change. As such, are young people engaging on this level and acknowledging structural issues in their work, and if so, what does this look like?

Critical consciousness, as previously stated, refers to how people “learn to critically analyze their social conditions and act to change them.” It targets oppression, defined as “the unjust exercise of power and the control of ideas and coveted resources in a way that produces and sustains social inequality.” Watts et al. emphasize three components of critical
consciousness: critical reflection, which encompasses an analysis of the structural, historical, and root causes of inequality; political efficacy, which refers to the perceived ability to effect political and social change through activism; and critical action, that is, action taken to bring about positive social change.\textsuperscript{120} This chapter explores how this understanding develops and to what extent young activists develop a critical consciousness around food. What might this critical consciousness look like vis-à-vis food justice? And is the development of this consciousness necessary to participating in the movement and working toward positive change?

Charles Levkoe offers another useful framework called \textit{transformative} food politics, which is a comprehensive approach to food justice that moves beyond the small-scale and individualistic tactics of many alternative food movements and toward “a reconceptualisation of both the root of current dilemmas and of the solutions that will address them.”\textsuperscript{151} This framework is valuable in understanding how young people move from a personal, individual relationship with food to a political and systemic one. Levkoe describes three elements crucial to engagement in transformative food politics: collective subjectivities, which represents a “shift away from acting strictly as a consumer, to having agency—and responsibility—beyond purchasing power.” This takes place when one uses food beyond individual meals, but rather for deeper, political engagement. The second element is a whole food system approach, which addresses the problems around the “siloing” of food issues by adopting a “comprehensive perspective that integrates social justice, ecological sustainability, community health, and democratic governance throughout all aspects of the food system, from policy, to production, to processing to distribution, to consumption, and to waste management.” The last element is reflexive localization, which acknowledges the benefits of local food systems but cautions against
“idealizing” local entities and situates the local within the historical and social contexts of place. In other words, “local is not seen as an alternative to globalization, but as an intrinsic part of it.”

Finally, we need to briefly situate these experiences within the social and cultural context in which these young people have grown up. These observations about young food activists are both time- and place-based. Over the past two decades, we’ve witnessed a dramatic shift in food and “foodie” culture, with huge growth in food-related content, both offline and online. Indeed, a large number of the young activists credited books and films like *Fast Food Nation*, *The Omnivore’s Dilemma*, and *Fresh* with sparking their interest and changing their perspective. And social media and the Internet have rapidly created infinite opportunities for talking and blogging about food, sharing and accessing recipes, photos, restaurant reviews, etc.163

The growth of the food movement in New York City in particular—and its diverse actors, goals, and strategies—also provides a bevy of opportunities and resources for engaging in food justice. Gail, for example, said her interest piqued around the time urban farms were on the rise, which she saw as a way to promote positive social change. Therefore, the social, geographical, and historical context is important; the time when these young people are seeking careers is also the time when food justice–related opportunities are more readily available. This also dovetails with the rise in social innovation and socially entrepreneurial careers and the increased desire among millennials to seek work that is meaningful, matches their values, and has a positive social impact, as previously discussed.159,160

With these frameworks and context in mind, this chapter describes how young people define food justice in terms of community building, incorporate discourses around food justice and food sovereignty, and ground their definitions and understandings in rights-based language. This chapter also demonstrates how they are critically reflexive of the broader movement,
through their critiques of how the movement operates, its need for greater representation and inclusivity, and the limits of social media with respect to food justice.

**Defining Food Justice: Young People’s Activist Food Voices**

*A vehicle for community building*

When asked why they engage in food justice, nearly all respondents talked about food’s “everydayness,” or their daily connection to food, as their central reason. That everyone has to eat, albeit a clichéd statement, is significant, as several noted. The realization of this ignites a movement from an individual relationship with food—for example, their view of food as a source of nutrition for their own body or their switch to vegetarianism—to a more community- and global-based perspective. This perhaps could be an early stage of Watts’ “critical reflection” component of critical consciousness. It may not necessarily demonstrate a recognition of larger or more systemic causes of inequality, but it is suggestive of Levkoe’s “collective subjectivities,” that is, when one uses food for purposes beyond the individual and begins “engaging in food-related behaviors to develop a food system that meets collective social needs.”

These young people described how they use food to bring people together and the importance of food as a tool for building and sustaining communities. This came in the form of running supper clubs and community dinners, to which neighbors are invited to communal meals. These spaces are spiritual and significant—they are about turning “a meal into a potential connector,” “bringing more people together who would otherwise not have ended up together,” or “sitting down around a table…sharing a meal together…having the food come from a sustainable source…that you know the farmers that grew it and just being able to connect on that deeper level.” In discussing the connections between arts justice and food justice, Teresa said, “They’re all tools…. Food is a tool toward the same goals of living a self-determined life and an informed life, and of using it to connect, whether it’s your cultural background or the cultural
background of the neighborhood that you live in.” These young people are creating spaces for people to come together to talk about food and its impact beyond the individual. They are also actively engaging in conversations with friends and family about their work and what it means to them. Food acts as a bridge and a connector as well as a focal point and vehicle for conversation and action.

Many further commented that, on a larger scale, this sentiment is very much missing from society. Creating and sustaining communities is important to these young people, personally and politically. In particular, it is a reflection of their food memories and their personal and cultural relationships with food growing up. Christine said she is involved with the grassroots farm-to-table work to “bring more attention to this specific community and embrace the culture, highlight the culture…. We’re combining [good food experiences] with a culture that’s already existing in the community.” She continued, “Community is a safe place. It’s a place where you have access to everything that you need, it’s comfortable, you support people that have been there forever, and it’s a place you feel a responsibility for [and] that you want to take care of.” Gail also highlighted the communal, inclusive, and sharing aspect of food central to urban farming. She is particularly drawn to the communal model for growing food together and sharing the harvest, as opposed to individual plots.

Anna sees food as an inroad to building “community cohesion.” Her goal is to change the way people engage with one another through an urban farm that grows for and with the community. The farm is meant to be a safe space for people to get to know and work alongside each other. In Anna’s opinion, it’s not just about building a farm or increasing access to local foods. Instead, she views food and community building as lenses.

[They’re for] looking at cohesion and addressing larger issues of poverty…. The work that I’m doing in helping to build a farm and all these other things aren’t going to solve.
all of the overarching poverty problems of the community, but I think it provides inroads
or connectors to do that.

Related to this, the young food activists cited concerns about a “crisis of the future” and
the need to do something about food, food systems, and the environment. Specifically, the
respondents referred to a loss of public knowledge about how to cook healthfully, the negative
impact of corporations (e.g., tobacco, alcohol, and soda companies) on health, shorter life spans,
a poorer quality of life, higher rates of noncommunicable diseases, sedentary lifestyles, lifestyles
of convenience, environmental challenges, and so forth. As Alyssa said, “Food is widening the
gap between the rich and the poor. And food is one of those things that falls within the cracks, so
there isn’t a lot of support—there isn’t a lot of awareness about how important this is.”

There was a consensus that there isn’t enough education or discussion about the state of
the food system and its impact on health and the environment. This relates to the negative and
“destructive” influence of corporations and lobbyists on health. Specifically, respondents
highlighted the unfair marketing practices of corporations and their ability to make processed
foods cheaply, and addictive, through certain ratios of fats, sugars, and salts, all in the name of
profit-making. Kimberly said, “[this is] food justice too, because we shouldn’t be subject to the
whims of the corporations that are brainwashing people because there isn’t enough funding in
public health and nutrition education…. Gail added that food justice is about “giving the control
of our food system back to people and communities, and taking it away from corporations.”

It is this social and political context that fuels young people’s desires to work toward
positive change. They are passionate about doing something that makes a difference, to “serve a
greater need,” and to broaden their horizons. Doing this in a collective manner and treating food
as a means to an end, whereby the process is as important as the outcome, are paramount goals.
The activists’ food voice is thus grounded in community, with an emphasis on in-person connections. While some caution against the risk of conflating community with inclusivity within a food justice framework, this need for community and the view that food can bring people together are pertinent. They mark the beginning of seeing food beyond the individual, beyond purposes of nutrition and sustenance. It also illustrates how, for these young activists, personal, “in-depth,” and “live” connections are the real drivers of building and sustaining social movements. The acts of sharing, creating, and interacting with food to build and foster communities are central to these young people. Food is a necessary vehicle for bringing people together and crucial to addressing and fixing the “crisis of the future.”

Food as a right: The right to access, justice, and sovereignty

When asked to define food justice, the activists toggled between discourses around food justice and food sovereignty, while maintaining rights-based language. This resembled the narrative of the broader movement and reflected the spectrum of food justice principles similar to the frameworks of Cadieux and Slocum, and Holt-Giménez and Shattuck. Everyone highlighted local, U.S.-centric issues concerning food access, nutrition, and food (in)security, but several identified more strongly with the globally defined notion of the right to food sovereignty and the need to shift power back to people and communities.

Food access and food security were the most common lenses for understanding food justice, whereby nearly all the activists felt that, first and foremost, everyone needs to eat. They said they believe everyone should be able to access fresh, healthy, affordable foods that they “consciously want” without having to travel long distances. But, unlike traditionally addressing food inequality through education, access, and personal responsibility, the activists’ definitions emphasized less the idea of choice and more the ideas of fairness, equal opportunity, and
equitable access. They concluded that everyone should have the right to healthy food, and “food should be a positive thing in society and not something that’s harmful.”

Within this discourse, the dominant theme concerned nutrition and healthfulness, including food deserts and the disparities between neighborhoods with regard to access to fresh fruits and vegetables. A couple of participants indeed focused more on these individual-level changes and the need to help, or change behavior. Naomi, for example, described food justice as “helping people need to realize… get them thinking about whole foods, vegetables, and what they’re putting in their bodies.” This is reflective of Lyson’s narrative of a “missionary-like desire to educate others.”

For the most part though, the respondents delved deeper and connected food access to power structures and structural inequalities within the food system, thus demonstrating the critical reflection component of critical consciousness. They explained that some people are unable to access certain foods due to their socioeconomic status, such as their income, race, class, location, and education level. A couple of activists raised concerns about the term “food desert,” as it belies a sense of nature and naturalness, and suggested the term “food apartheid” instead. Sarah, who works with a school food program and volunteers with two urban-gardening initiatives focused on nurturing collective black leadership, said:

Food justice is really about people in their own community learning that what [their community] looks like around food isn’t a mistake. It looks this way on purpose and not just, ‘This is because I’m poor or it’s because I live here. …’ These neighborhoods look this way for a reason. [And] in learning about that, realizing that they can change it and really take ownership and not [have] to depend on people from the outside coming to save them.

This theme of empowerment and ownership arose frequently. Anna explained that “it means you have the right to determine what you’re eating, when you’re eating it, why you’re eating it, how you get that food…. It means that…you also have the ability to articulate that for
yourself.” Anna emphasized that it’s not about telling people what she thinks they need, rather, it’s “teaching people how to understand what they [themselves] need.”

There was also much discussion of food justice as being part of a larger system, shaped by culture, history, and politics, connected to other social justice movements, and comprising many sub-movements. For example, Esther noted that her work as a compost coordinator at farmers’ markets didn’t always feel like food justice to her, as sometimes the goal was too narrow (i.e., focused solely on the organic). She preferred taking a more holistic view of the food system (i.e., environment, travel, local, etc.). For these activists, food justice is about access, yes, but also about food policies like the Farm Bill, subsidies, marketing practices, workers’ rights, capitalism, immigration, a shift away from corporate agro-businesses and toward local ones, regional growing, and sustainability. As Oscar said, food justice includes:

Being a working-class, transgender, queer person in New York, having access to affordable and organic global foods. [It’s the] farmworkers who bring our food to my table, the history of how destructive our food system is…from African slavery to pushing indigenous-first people out of their land for us to start our agricultural system to how destructive the food corporations are with producing large amount of food and exploiting people and animals and earth, environmentally. It’s all interconnected in how it works: the people who prepare our food in the kitchen, making sure that they have all rights and are supported with organizing and having an environment that is just for them, too—you know, how the food gets from the farm to our tables.

While food access and food (in)security were the most commonly used frames for defining food justice, several young people identified much more strongly with food sovereignty, and explicitly named it, as opposed to food justice, as their connection to the movement. First coined by La Via Campesina in the late 1990s at the World Food Summit, the term is defined as “the right of peoples to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through sustainable methods and their right to define their own food and agriculture systems.” To these young activists, food sovereignty is the need to shift the power back to people and communities. It
encompasses issues such as justice, democracy, gender equality, children, and education. The concept is reflected in more global and global-south perspectives, whereas food justice is used predominantly in the United States. Food sovereignty elevates the concept of food justice beyond access, with several calling it the “ultimate goal.” It is, according to these young people, more than just knowing where your food comes from, or buying healthy food. It’s about “having people have their hands in the dirt.” As Teresa and Sarah said, respectively:

[It] may sound like it’s very much American individualism—I’m on my own thing—but really…when it comes to land and nature, the more you become invested in something, the more you realize you’re part of a community, because [collective] actions…impact what you do so much. It’s building community by building ownership…. My personal passion…is all about land stewardship and farming and connecting to the food system…to really create this tipping point in the community, where folks are working together to bring back food cultures. That drives, by nature, fruit and vegetable consumption. It drives healthier habits, because you’re paying attention.

Growing food is so powerful because…you can do anything, from working on big policies and that really shitty farm bill that just passed to being like, ‘I’m just going to grow my own food. I’m going to grow my own stuff. I’m going to grow in my community. I’m not going to wait for a supermarket to come and sell me food. I’m going to do it myself, and in that, I’ll help others.’ It’s really about people recognizing what’s going on and then being able to counteract it.

Caleb distinguished food sovereignty from food security and food justice, defining it as the “need to radically democratize the food system” and “based in agro-ecology self-determination for the people over their food system.” This self-determination relates to the “right to choice,” that is, the right to choose to grow your own food and the “choice to eat what you want,” which is grounded in justice and equality. Richard echoed this by discussing the need to change structures and environments and to decentralize the ownership structure, create jobs, and address the “structural conditions that dictate how the food is grown, who gets to grow the food, who gets access to land and resources, and who gets access to markets.” This requires more radical approaches to the food movement, including shifting away from individual blame to
systemic change, and addressing the negative impact the corporatization of food has on food quality, labor rights, and access. Several others spoke about food sovereignty without naming it, but emphasized that the food justice movement is about getting people to engage with and grow their own food.

These definitions are in some ways tied to the type of change they would like to see. Those with a more “local” definition, or one that’s focused more on food access, food insecurity, and nutrition, are also seeking change on the local level by increasing access to fruits and vegetables, and teaching people how food is grown. Sylvia, for example, uses food access and food security discourses throughout her narrative, and the change she wants is increased access to better-quality food. Those with a more “global” perspective spoke about structural issues and were working toward more systemic changes. Oscar, for example, wants to “dismantle the oppression that exists with our food system…[by] educating young people and being in support of their struggles.” His definition of food justice is holistic, historical, and structural and includes discussion of the role of corporations, workers’ rights, oppression, and structural racism.

In general though, the activists often shifted between local and global discourses. Their definitions of food justice and food sovereignty thus illustrate a spectrum of individual and systemic changes to the food system, from access to justice to sovereignty. There was a lot of overlap, as well, with some describing elements of food sovereignty when defining food justice. And there was not a conflation of “more local” with “more just” or an overemphasis on education or lack of knowledge as a main barrier to an improved food system. In fact, several noted that it is unrealistic to think one could solve all food issues by increasing access through gardens and farms, as such challenging the mainstream discourses of education and access as solutions to inequities. However, they do see gardens and farms as strong educational
tools and places to teach, bring generations together, and spark interest in and conversations (and perhaps action) around food and community. As Richard explained, “It’s about the community coming together around the space and being able to say what we want to do this with the space.” Hence, it is about shifting ownership and decision-making to the community members who own and run the garden. The space can also work to influence action beyond the garden, such as by organizing community outreach, food security projects, partnerships, CSAs, education, etc. An understanding of the potential and limits of food justice further demonstrates a move toward developing a strong activist food voice. Overall, whether guided by food justice or food sovereignty discourse, the activists’ food voices were grounded in notions of equity and rights-based language, and indicative of a high level of critical reflection. As Holt-Giménez, who distinguishes the localized work of progressive food justice groups from the structural-level work of radical food sovereignty groups, said, “The point is…they are two sides of the same movement.”

It is important to note that among all interviewees, there was initially some hesitancy when asked to define food justice. Not everyone was able to define food justice without having to take a moment to think about it. Even those who believed more strongly in food sovereignty began by defining food justice with respect to access and nutrition, likely because it is the more normative and widespread concept of food justice, in the U.S. and particularly in urban areas like New York City. As to whether it is a term they use, for many it depends on “which circles” they’re in. In their work doing community organizing, for instance, a few said they do not use the term, rather they talk more broadly about nutrition, healthy food, community, access, etc. This is because they understand that many might not know what food justice is, or because of the varied ways to interpret and define it.
Young People’s Analysis of the Food Justice Movement

The food justice movement provides a space for young people to do work that is meaningful and value-driven. And we now have a deeper understanding of what food justice means to them. But what does the broader movement look like to these activists? If we believe that young people and intergenerational efforts are necessary for transforming food systems, we must first understand how the movement functions from the perspective of those actively participating. Findings reveal two major critiques of the movement: the first was about the way the movement operates and the need to learn from history and other social movements. The next was about the movement’s historic whiteness and how race is perceived within it. Finally, the role of social media in the food justice movement is described.

The identity of the food justice movement

First, there was widespread agreement that, by and large, the movement is disconnected, lacks a clear definition or mission, and is in need of greater collaboration and solidarity. While food is on the one hand very tangible and easily connects everyone, as a social justice issue, its broadness—is it about being local, organic, or reviving the food system?—challenges the clarity of the “ask.” Caleb describes:

I’m frustrated with the food justice movement because I think it’s become a wishy-washy nebulous term that doesn’t mean anything…. I appreciate and love that work, and at the same time I think more needs to be done and [want] to be involved in that kind of work but [don’t see] a definite place where I can plug into.

Caleb further shared that he is inspired by the strong youth activism work in Arizona and by the Dreamers, who demonstrate an understanding of social movements.

It’s probably something to do with the fact that their oppression is so tangible and immediate and urgent that that’s the response that comes from it. [There’s] something [about] food that can sometimes be more subtle and not as clear. It’s challenging.
So while there is a sustained commitment to food justice, there is also an overall frustration with how the movement is being handled. There were critiques of the lack of collaboration, as evidenced by organizations trying to realize strategies, programs, and activities that other organizations had already implemented. This replication with the lack of desire to collaborate is happening throughout New York City and contributes to issues around trust in communities and the importance of establishing continuous, sustainable relationships. The activists explained this may be due to the fact that the food movement comprises many sub-movements—for example, sustainable agriculture, gardening, markets, local foods, organic foods, food access, nutrition, labor rights, environment, etc.—while it is also closely connected to other movements (e.g., climate change, gender, immigration). The work is very much isolated, and the disparate missions of the organizations make it challenging to come up with a clear definition or purpose, or to reach the ultimate goal of overturning the food system as a whole.

A few raised concerns about the food movement being conflated with the “foodie” movement, which some believe is “devoid of politics.” Teresa said it’s “too sexy for its own good. Everyone wants to abstractly work with food. I always tell them to [first] go wait some tables, go work in a restaurant that’s sourcing meat sustainably.” Richard, when speaking about how his mother is a “foodie,” examined the impact of that on his identity. He recognizes the “the privilege…but also the beauty…of being a foodie” and the ability to “buy a fancy $50 cookbook and buy $50 worth of ingredients and put them all together and then eat something that came from 5,000, 10,000 miles away…the origin of that which had nothing to do with your background at all.” Mary similarly added that food justice is sometimes conflated with gentrification, especially the farm-to-table and sustainability movements, since the term “farm-to-table” often invokes notions of fine dining. But this is problematic, as there are indeed
community- and grassroots-led farm-to-table movements (for instance, the work Christine does in Washington Heights). As Mary said, “it’s the language that really isolates the whole movement.”

Thus, they made distinctions between what they see as more grassroots efforts to make food more affordable, healthy, and accessible, versus the more mainstream, middle-class movement around organic food and green markets. And many critiqued the complicated space between these movements. Andrew, for example, started out working at a farmer’s market that claimed to be focused on community and neighborhood revitalization. On the one hand, he said, he feels reviving the community is important. But as he saw the market shift to a fine-foods market, he realized it was creating further disparities as the people working there couldn’t afford to buy the food, nor could the people living in the community where the market is located.

And for some, like Esther, who works at a farmer’s market in the Bronx, their jobs attempt to straddle the two.

[The market is] technically open to anyone…. [But] I didn’t feel like I was serving a greater need. Most of the vendors knew that they were selling to staff. Things were relatively affordable, but there were a lot of people coming in saying, ‘How come everything isn’t organic?’ There’s just a lot of anger; these sort of self righteous…and I sort of recognize myself in that a little bit. I did a lot of explaining about why local is important, too. The fact that your carrots were grown organically in California and then flown on a plane here sort of negates the fact that they were grown organically in the first place. It didn’t feel like food justice to me.

Here we see Esther navigating the complexities and confusion of the movement in relation to her identity within the movement. She highlighted the inaccessibility of farmer’s markets while framing her identity within a discussion about “local” versus “sustainable.” Irena similarly said, “Sometimes I feel like I’m in it for the equity issues. And then sometimes I just feel like a foodie. Just someone that really likes to eat and likes to explore culture through plates of food and would like that to be preserved. You want your own culture to be preserved because
you think that it’s worth that and you want others to feel the same. Sometimes it’s an organizing standpoint and sometimes it’s just like a foodie.” Others concurred with this sentiment, relaying the importance and pleasures of food and cooking. Thus, food as being a focal point of activism is not necessarily mutually exclusive of food as being a craft, or an expression of care. The respondents made clear the multiple spaces – political, personal, emotional, physical – that food occupies.

There are also multiple and complex factors that influence the food system, making it challenging to bridge many of the divisions. Anna explained:

It has to do with youth and youth education. It has to do with integration. It has to do with addressing poverty. It has to do with local food, but it also has to do with understanding, like, the way people identify with food and what food means to them…. And also at the tail end of it, what happens afterward.

As such, for some, the consensus is that “we haven’t come together for one big action or one big movement-building thing” as there isn’t enough “personal essence” to inspire a mass movement. Put another way, the work that Eleanor does is more “one-to-one, person-to-person relationship organizing,” which is different from the “momentum-driven building [of] a movement of people who care about something.” She felt this is because food justice is less politicized, as compared to the Arab Spring or the Occupy movement, whereby those engaged in the latter were “drawn by a greater narrative to engage in something and less of a ‘I need to do outreach to these ten people and make sure they come to this meeting’ [approach].”

For others, the food movement is lacking self-reflection and an acknowledgement of past and current social movements. In my conversation with Caleb, for example, we talked about the “analysis paralysis” phase he currently finds himself in, his frustration with the status of the food movement, and his desire for a more “radical analysis of what’s happening and more radical
solutions and strategies.” When asked for examples of the bigger changes needed within the food justice movement, he responded:

I have a friend around my age who’s involved in La Via Campesina, the global peasant movement, and it’s one of the most inspiring organizations to me. He said the other countries that are involved in La Via Campesina have hundreds of thousands of base-building grassroots organizations, whereas in the United States, there are more policy-oriented organizations, not bases of people that are organizing. The conditions are so different here. A couple weeks ago I went to Mexico and visited the Zapatistas and was thinking about Emiliano Zapata. His thing was land reform, so I started thinking about more radical things that are not spoken about here. I think a lot of people would say one of the major issues is with the commodification of land and who has access to land. As far as what kind of organizing around it is happening in the United States, I don’t see it…. I think organizations like the MST [Landless Workers Movement] in Brazil, the Zapatistas, and other peasant movements in other parts of the world [do it well]. It’s like how the hell did they do that? These [are] humongous, massive movements that are very radical...connecting issues of meeting people’s every day needs but also with revolutionary analysis.

Caleb went on to cite the Black Panthers and Young Lords as examples of social movements that successfully engaged, organized, and excited young people without needing monetary compensation. Several others also explained how the current food movement has roots in the Black Panther Free Breakfast Program, the Civil Rights Movement, the Victory Gardens Movement, and early labor-rights movements. References were also made to the current global peasant movement and the need to work across sectors as a more effective and radical approach to improving food systems. Caleb and others are demonstrating an understanding of historical and current social efforts and frameworks and a desire to apply lessons from the past to present challenges within the food justice movement.

Thus, for many, their analysis of the food movement entails understanding, appreciating, and taking lessons from history. It also involves situating their own activist lives within history and broader structural contexts, demonstrating their own use of “bifocals” and attention to structure and lives.\footnote{146} This appreciation of history and politics, learned through reading and
social justice training, greatly shapes their activist food voice and their understanding of and participation in the broader movement. According to Watts, having an understanding of the importance of past events and social movements is key to recognizing the systemic and root issues of a current social movement and essential to developing a critical consciousness. As Watts states, the knowledge and appreciation of history and politics and the work others have done demonstrate an understanding of “cause-and-effect relationships between ongoing social forces and current social circumstances.”

For many of these young activists, their narratives are positively inspired and influenced by historic activists. References to the Black Panthers, Cesar Chavez and the National Farm Workers Association, La Via Campesina, Malcolm X, the Young Lords, the Zapatistas, and the leaders of the Civil Rights Movement were made in nearly half of the interviews. The source of this information varied—from friends, to parents, to engagement in youth development programs where such knowledge was embodied, to books, to classes in high school or college. Additionally, the young people did not merely name these influential leaders. They engaged in discussion and analysis about the role these leaders played within the broader food justice movement and their influence on their own work. Richard told the story of being suspended from college, then going home and reading *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, which affected him greatly.

[Malcom X] was in a similar situation [to mine]. He was on his way in terms of his education, and he chose to…be a hustler. In some ways, that was his rejection of the system that he felt was rejecting him as a black man. When I read this, I said, ‘This is my opportunity. I’m like him. I’m in a similar situation, like I made my mistakes, and this is an opportunity.’ I said, ‘I need to go away, even from my family.’

Richard’s story illustrates a personal-to-political transformation inspired by the activists who came before him and the development of his own critical consciousness. His interest in food
is rooted in family and learning how to garden and compost with his grandfather. And it is through a combination of work and learning about history, where he begins to see the “powerful act” of growing food and its connections to history, race, racism, and culture. While some proactively emphasized the role of past movements in shaping and inspiring their activism, others did not look to (or failed to mention) these previous efforts for guidance. There is not a clear distinction between those who did and did not cite historical leaders as role models, with regard to race/ethnicity or type of work, although those who did not tended to focus more on individual-level issues with regard to food justice. However, because a specific question about history and social movements was not asked, I am unable to make conclusions about any differences. Given the importance of the understanding of history in shaping critical consciousness, future research would benefit from targeted questions regarding this knowledge.

**Food justice and race**

The other major theme that arose when critiquing the food movement was the issue of race and inclusivity, or the lack thereof. Many agreed there needs to be greater gender and racial equality, noting that the movement is currently very white, privileged, and male-dominated, with few women and people of color involved. As such, there was much consensus that there needs to be greater and more active community involvement, representation, and participation. Denise explained:

The food movement for a long time, it’s been white people that say, ‘You need to eat kale….’ For me, the food movement that I connect most with is the food movement of people like Karen Washington and Ray Figueroa [two Bronx-based leaders of color in the food justice movement], and the other groups that are emerging.

Eleanor echoed this sentiment and further added that the movement needs to be much more of a “people’s movement,” as currently “there’s a lot of tokenism around both young people and people of color…. They’ll just be put on boards of organizations so they can be like,
‘Oh, that one Latina woman is doing that…’” And as Irena said, “I look more like the people who food impacts, but the people that sit here [running the organization] don’t. How do we change that conversation?” In Irena’s case, a strong sense of identity is crucial for elevating more voices. She looked to a role model for inspiration:

There’s a woman at my job who…is inspirational in a lot of ways. She’s about 35. She’s also a woman of color. The older you get, the more secure you become in who you are. You see her just busting up conversations and saying the things that have to get said that other people may not think of or may not know how to say. Because she’s an organizer, because she’s coming from a transitioning gentrifying neighborhood, because she’s a woman of color, because she’s a mother, she’s coming in the conversation and is like this, this, this. Sometimes she says stuff and I’m like, “Yes…She’s going to throw wrenches.” You have to. It’s easy for conversations to go a certain way. My first years at [this organization], I would sit there and be like, “I don’t know if that’s a good idea.” Now I’m like, “No, do we ever think of…”

Understanding the personal and political relationships between food justice and race is also important to the activists. Richard’s story reflects on his experience as a half-white, half-black male and how he straddles his experiences with both privilege and injustice. He explained:

The gray of race is very much a part of who I am, and I understand the importance of thinking critically about that from my day-to-day experience and having certain privileges because I’m fairer-skinned and also seeing the economic privileges that my mom enjoys versus my dad.

Growing up, he experienced the “racial aspect of food.” He told the story of how his dad would take him to fast-food restaurants like McDonald’s and White Castle, and they would order a sack of sliders after school when he was in the fourth grade, which was a memorable and positive experience for him. He said:

It was great times with my dad, and now that I’m in alternative food spaces, I’m supposed to look back and say my dad poisoned me or something? He had limited resources. He was paying child support. He was sending money back home to his parents—that’s part of our culture. And he was trying to hold it down mentally. The insurance wasn’t going to cover his psychological care…. He had manic depression. In many ways, my dad was struggling. He had a good job, but this was his way of being able to feed me and still be able to go and take me to the basketball game to see the
Knicks. We [would] go to McDonald’s sometimes, and I don’t think of those things as being negative just because I don’t like the corporate entities that they are.

Richard’s story illustrates the complex interplay between memory (in particular, food memories), family culture, economics, and sociopolitical development. He, Oscar, Roger, and others, through their commitment to and understanding of their personal history and how it relates to broader structural inequalities, strongly exemplify Watts’ notion of critical reflection. This is further evidenced by Richard’s commentary, who cited the work of Guthman, Alkon, and Agyeman and how race and power operate in food markets and other alternative food spaces.

People [have] had farmer’s markets for who knows [how] long. It’s not a white thing. I would guarantee you that the market that my grandmother went to, climbing down the hill and then back up again every Sunday for… 50 [or] more years, would be looked at very differently from our farmer’s market that’s predominantly white here. So that has an impact on my understanding of this movement and why we need to look at race, why it’s important, why it can’t be ignored.

A lot of us as gardeners and farmers, people that are into growing food…it’s a lot messier than the dirt and the compost. It’s the politics, and sometimes blood is spilled. I hate to make it sound so dramatic, but sometimes people’s livelihoods are at stake in these conversations when we’re talking about whether one community is going to get something [like funding], or no community is going to get something. And politics always inevitably becomes a game of who you know and just playing this game when we all just want to do the best thing for everyone.”

Roughly half of the activists acknowledged the need to examine the relationship between food and race, and how the voices of women, people of color, and young people, are needed to elevate and push the movement forward. By doing so, these activists demonstrate a level of critical reflection and a deep analysis of systemic issues.

Food justice and social media

It is difficult to discuss young people’s perceptions of and participation in the food justice movement without a mention of social media, given the prevalent role the internet and social
media play in social movements, knowledge sharing, advocacy, and networking. Many of the respondents spoke about how social media can be useful for initial outreach and bringing people together. However, as stated previously, the personal, “in-depth” and “live” connections are crucial drivers of building and sustaining social movements. Denise, who works for a food workers’ advocacy organization, explained:

I think it’s a great way to connect, but I also think it’s dangerous, because you have to understand [that] it can’t take away from the real, on-the-ground, connecting-with-people work. But I do think it’s a huge part of really getting your message out and being able to connect with people.

Roger, who runs urban agricultural programs for high school students, echoed this sentiment, adding that social media can’t alone inspire activism.

People aren’t necessarily always going to use social media to get inspired to do social justice first. People might be going just literally to be social. So I think it has potential…. I’m not trying to downplay the food movement at all…. In terms of social justice, I think there has to be that personal connection to the work.

There is also concern that “a lot of the activism today is high-tech, low touch.” Here Caleb described his skepticism with social media as an organizing tool and the “clicktivism” phenomenon.

It is useful to find out about things that are happening, events and stuff like that. But as an organizing tool, I’m kind of skeptical about it…. There’s that whole ‘clicktivism’ phenomenon, where it’s like, ‘I’m sharing stuff on Facebook—this is activism.’ I’m guilty of that, so I’m not trying to hate on other people…[but] a lot [of] the skills and how to organize a community are just lost. A lot of it goes to this weird social media stuff, where I don’t know if that’s really where you’re going to be able to build movements of people who are committed. It’s about those relationships that you build with people, [and] a digital relationship is not going to do it.

Many of these arguments echo earlier findings about the significance of food as a connector and as a way to build and foster communities. It also reflects a shift in not just the type of work people want, but how they want to work. During my interview with Caleb, he told me that he had attended an Ella Baker organizing circle.
Ella Baker is well known for being critical of Dr. King and that part of the civil rights movement as being very hierarchical. We need to develop leadership within ourselves, and organizing needs to be more participatory and more horizontal, so that appealed to me.

Across the board, the activists also felt that the “siloed” nature of the food movement makes connecting through social media challenging, as “there isn’t an ‘umbrella’ organization or movement.” Christine explained, “The people…the food activists, they keep to themselves. It’s like they talk to the people that are already [involved].” She raised the importance of bringing people together from different backgrounds and fields to allow for conversations across different circles, as “what really moves change when it’s not the people, when it’s people outside of the core that are involved in these things.” The various forms of social media also do not allow for targeting specific audiences. As Anna said, “Your target audience is everyone who might come across [your message]. So the messaging that you’re putting out there is really hard, and I think also…because it’s such light communication, it’s very flip.”

Others raised the issue of funding and the nascent field of research that examines the impact and the role of social media outreach, particularly for food justice organizations. Mary explained, “I just think, maybe people haven’t been able to prove how much it’s worth yet. So they haven’t had a reason to do it. But I think social media is super important, especially if you’re talking about youth engagement.”

There was a consensus that for the broader food justice movement, social media has yet to have a meaningful or strong presence or to “be integrated as much as it probably could be.” Esther and Roger, respectively, explained this further in making a comparison with other social media-driven movements.

Obviously, we’ve seen that it’s useful in organizing people and gathering people and sort of connecting people to a movement. Everyone talks about the Arab Spring. I don’t think
that’s happened with food. Like, there’s no hash tag or handle that people sort of think of when they think of food or food justice or even any smaller subsection.

Thinking about Egypt…and that revolution, and that was completely organized on Facebook. And we haven’t necessarily done that. I haven’t seen anyone really do that in the United States, except through fundraising to donate money—I guess those large companies I’m thinking [of], like the Red Campaign with GAP and stuff like that…. I think it’s scary in terms of being able to message lots of people, have everybody receive it, and then be able to do something with it. So [for] me, personally, it hasn’t changed the game for me. But I think as movement-building moves forward, you have to include that in your strategy somehow.

Simon referred to a general lack of interest in food justice issues among those not already involved in this work.

If I put a picture of the Transpacific Partnership and how that’s going to change—that’s going to ruin everything—nobody responds. Or if I talk about the purple tomatoes that are promised to cure cancer because of an antioxidant…I get one like or no likes or ‘Shut up, hippie.’ Then I put up a picture of a cat or I put up a funny stupid thing and the people react to that. We got over—what is it?—like, 200,000 votes on that petition to deport Justin Bieber?

Overall, there was much critique about the potential for social media and technology to foster actual collaboration within the food movement. Social media allows for sparking interest in an organization or sharing updates and photos, as opposed to initiating interaction, conversation, and movement building. As Hyde states, “sharing of content alone does not directly lead to collaboration.” This conclusion raises another issue of who activists want to collaborate with. For instance, while the #foodjustice hashtag does indeed exist on Twitter, many interviewees commented that it is in large part followed by those already immersed or interested in the issue. This, in and of itself, is not necessarily bad; however, reaching new participants, instead of “preaching to the choir,” was of interest to these activists, and a challenge they don’t see social media addressing.

This tension is perhaps further complicated by the nature and context of food justice. As we saw earlier, these young activists are motivated by the importance of sharing food with
others, making food, and respecting food. These reasons all reflect offline, physical, in-person connections. While food can also be shared through blogs, photography, TV, etc., the act of sharing, creating, and interacting with food to build and foster community cannot occur in virtual spaces, and it is this act that is so central to these young people. Benkler, for instance, discusses the types of relationships that come from “virtual communities,” and how on the one hand, relationships may flourish, as we can more easily connect and reach people, but on the other, we may develop more “limited-purpose, loose relationships.” I would argue that through social and digital media, we are able to be connected to and “see” other food cultures, which then can be brought back and shared in a more local, embodied way. But for these young food activists, online and offline communities serve different purposes, particularly when it comes to their food justice work.

**Discussion**

This chapter sought to address three broad questions. Why are these young activists choosing food justice, what does food justice (and the broader movement) mean to them, and what conclusions can we make about the extent of critical consciousness among this group, if we consider that a marker of social action and change?

We saw in Chapter 3 how their memories, culture, and values have been shaped by food. This chapter reveals what food means to these activists on a justice level, and it begins with the simple, widespread statement that food affects everyone. By and large, the activists’ food voice is prominently grounded in notions of community and community building, and shaped by the quotidian nature of food. They are interested in the connections between food and many other social movements, and as such, how it can be an effective vehicle for building and bridging communities.
Critics might caution this as another example of the conflation of community with inclusivity, or of the good/local/alternative food movement with food justice. But, while the statement “everyone needs to eat,” on its own, ignores the systemic inequalities embedded within the food system, the broader narratives of these activists suggest otherwise. There was certainly much analysis of the local food movement, but it was framed more as a process toward food justice, and less as an end goal or objective. Conversations around education and “bringing good to others” were situated within narratives of justice and empowerment. Irrespective of the locally- or globally-minded missions and practices of their workplace, or their length of engagement, these activists are incorporating transformative food politics in their understanding and analysis of food justice.

There is, of course, a spectrum to this level of critical consciousness. Some spoke very clearly and cogently about the complexities, history, and structural roots of inequality and food justice. Those who incorporated food sovereignty discourse in their narratives indeed showed a deeper understanding of the current debate between food justice and sovereignty. There was also greater recognition of the relationship between power, representation, and inequalities, and the “production and reproduction of white space,” that Guthman refers to. Others had a less developed (or articulated) perception of food justice. And two had definitions that were more “missionary-like.” But overall, there were elements of rights-based language throughout nearly all of the definitions, demonstrating a level of “transformative” food politics.

The food activists also had several critiques and reflections on the broader movement. Namely, they are critical of how the movement operates and its disconnectedness and lack of collaboration. They suggested a need for greater self-reflection within the movement, and a push to incorporate lessons from history and previous social movements. Others highlighted the lack
of inclusivity and representation, criticizing how the movement is still dominated by white, male figures, and that voices of people of color and young people are much needed.

Finally, there is interest in the interaction between an activist’s individual identity and the collective identity and commitments of a social movement. From a narrative point of view, there was an ease in the storytelling when I asked personal questions about their interest in food, or the work they do. But there was more hesitation and pause for thought when I asked them to define food justice, or their thoughts about the movement. This might be reflective of the sprawling and fragmented nature of food justice, which makes it difficult to foster a stronger connection to the broader movement. Thus, the collective narrative feels like it is in a more nascent state, and there remains an ongoing navigation and reconciling of their personal identities with the larger movement. But, it is clear, that the process of reflecting on their journey allowed a connection to be made between their early food memories and their current work. Food justice thus offers a platform through which young people can express their commitment to food, social justice, values, beliefs, and health.
CHAPTER 5

“IT’S MORE THAN THE GOOD WORK THAT YOU DO; IT’S THE PERSON THAT YOU ARE”: YOUNG PEOPLE’S IDENTITIES AS FOOD ACTIVISTS

These narratives reveal how family values, food memories, and mentors build a foundation for an interest in food-related work, and the personal and experiential moments that propelled these young people to pursue a career in social justice, particularly food justice. We’ve also seen that these young activists are critically reflective and understand the broader movement. This chapter is about their identity as activists. It starts with an examination of how young people see themselves. For example, what language do they use to describe themselves and the work they do? The second section presents detailed stories of two activists to illustrate the differences in the ways narrative and identity are performed. The chapter ends with recommendations from the activists, based on their own self-reflection, for how public health practitioners can better engage young people in food- and social-justice work.

There is a plethora of research examining the development of adolescent identity and the process by which young people come to understand who they are, who they want to be, and what they want to do when they grow up. Identity development is seen as crucial for the creation of motives and aspirations for work and may predict future positive outcomes (e.g., adaptability to changing job markets, finding meaning in work, well-being). Some of the research has focused on “self-oriented” intentions, but increasingly, there is greater emphasis on the development of both self-oriented and beyond-the-self-oriented aspects of development—that is, how young people come to develop a sense of wanting to impact the world beyond the self. Research has suggested that those who have both self- and beyond-the-self-oriented motives are more likely to have a stronger sense of meaning and purpose in life than those without, and older age (e.g., high
school versus middle school), school-related assignments, and support from friends being key factors in the development of intrinsic motives.

Other researchers have examined the path from school to work and the role of self-identified career potential during this process. On the one hand, there are those who experience challenging pathways toward a career path, whereby they may frequently change jobs or attempt further education. Societally, this is challenged by decreasing opportunities for young people in the labor force and a dearth of job-training programs. Vuolo et al. found that receiving an associate’s, a bachelor’s, or a vocational technical degree was a precursor to career acquisition. While those from more advantaged socioeconomic backgrounds were more likely to go from receiving their bachelor’s to forging a career, consistent work in high school (as opposed to sporadic work) reduced the potential for “floundering” after controlling for socioeconomic background.

For some theorists, the process of achieving a “stable” self-identity comes through periods of exploration and commitment, with exploration being the examination of different potential identities and commitment being the embodiment of an identity. This resonates strongly with earlier findings that time for exploration, or trial and error, is one of the pathways toward involvement in social justice. Variations in these notions of exploration and commitment have arisen, with an understanding that these processes are dynamic. However, much of the research and operationalization of these terms have been survey- and scales-based.

This reflects yet another approach to understanding identity development: through the use of narrative and the process of constructing an identity through the telling of the past. That is, “life stories serve to make sense of one’s past, present, and anticipated future and are partly constructed by making meaning of past experience.” Self-reflection is therefore a critical
factor in the development of identity. As Kierkegaard said, “Lives are lived forwards, yet
understood backwards.” As such, self-identity requires a level of reflexivity and understanding
of one’s own story that, according to sociologist Giddens, is “continuously revised and
evolving.” He posits that when someone’s self-identity is stable, their life and circumstances
make sense, and they are able to “explain” the past—with respect to their future—with ease. This is a cyclical process, though, as others suggest that the process of narration can enable
reflective processes crucial to forming and maintaining a narrative identity. Faye Ginsburg, in
her ethnographic account of pro-choice and pro-life activists, similarly shows how lived
experiences are at the crux of many activists’ narrative. In other words, an activist’s lived
experiences interweave with the historical and its ultimate influence on the activist’s current
position and role in the controversy. In her account, Ginsburg reveals the different life
experiences of the activists and the ways in which each uniquely embodied, interpreted, and put
into action the underlying meanings of their “turning points” or “awakenings,” thereby shaping
their stance on abortion.

Applying this theoretical grounding, this chapter explores the embodiment of identity and
the telling of activists’ narrative, as it pertains to work. Once their interest has been piqued
through lived experiences, exploration, and opportunity structures, what follows is the
development of their work ethic and initiative, the value they place on work, and their desire to
gain experience in the area of social justice. These opportunities shape their motivations for and
commitment to working in food justice, as evidenced by increased engagement in learning and
participating in multiple projects to deepen their understanding of the field. Similar to other
studies of activists’ trajectories, job selection is therefore indicative of a broader and proactive
commitment to social justice. And it is through this process that young people begin to develop their own sense of identity within the food-justice movement.

This chapter will examine four main themes that arose around identity: that activism is work, not a job; a shift away from terminology like “activist” and a distinction between “activism” and “practical activism”; a trend toward teaching and mentoring; and a desire to achieve authenticity. Among these activists, there were also two dominant “performances” of their narratives—there were those whose stories were constantly interwoven with the personal and the political, and there were those whose stories followed a more “professional,” linear, chronological trajectory.

**The Identity of a Food Justice Activist**

This section examines language and how young people self-identify. I asked young food activists, is this the terminology they connect with? What is their identity around work and activism? The quote in the title of this chapter comes from Sarah’s interview, in which she discussed her process of reflecting on her work process and how at one point she was overwhelmed and feared burning out because she’s “doing all this [food] work constantly…. It’s like a rabbit hole that you fall into where you learn more and more.” Sarah used to keep her work separate from her personal life. “It was my way of trying to achieve work-life balance,” she said, but with time she could no longer do so. She said: “I can’t keep these two separate. It’s actually a problem when you do because it’s a disservice to yourself because you’re not talking about what you’re really interested in…. It’s more than the good work that you do; it’s the person that you are.” For Sarah and others, their work is inextricably tied to their identity and sense of self.
**Activism is work, not a job**

During my interviews, the language around “work” and “job” and “activism” was muddled. There is a shift that occurs along the young activists’ trajectory, when the job is no longer a job, but, rather, it becomes much more integral to the young people’s core identity. Roger put it simply when he described how his first paid internship on an urban farm as a high school student was initially to save money for sneakers.

Then out of nowhere, you’re just doing the work, doing the work, doing the work, and then…all the programs [and] the people that were involved…just really kept me wanting to come back. Eventually it didn’t become about making money, it became more about the actual work we were doing.

Irena similarly described her work as an organizer as “something I actually intentionally do. At first it’s unintentional—it’s part of the job. Then eventually it becomes a part of you that you just naturally do.” Teresa concurred:

Activism is work, not a job…. I believe in work. I think that you have to want to do the work, and a lot of times work is not that visible…. I think work is tremendous…. I can spend Tuesday/Wednesday nights in a 9 o’clock meeting with my residents, and it doesn’t feel like work, because it’s who I am.

For Roger, Irena, Teresa, and others, there is an immense pride in doing what they love—being paid to do so is a bonus. Several were even astonished or surprised that they could be paid to be organizers and do social-justice work, work they find rewarding and meaningful. Roger no longer considers his work a job. He said, “I look at it as me doing community service every day in my neighborhood.” As such, for the vast majority, their work is first and foremost about finding a way to “pay it forward” and “have an impact on others through this work,” because “food is not just about me; it’s about everyone.” We are beginning to see, then, how their understanding of food justice is closely tied to the meaning behind their work.
This feeling that their work is not just a job—that it’s much more integral to their identity—represents a more global outlook and perspective. When asked about their day-to-day work, contradictions arose, as the narratives became less idyllic. Many of the young people revealed they are struggling with numerous aspects of the nonprofit and social-justice world, such as ineffective and poor management, “people who don’t show up,” bureaucracies, organizations whose missions are misaligned with their practices, the nonprofit industrial complex, and structural and inequality issues within the organization. Their personal ideals are not in line with that of the organization. Teresa’s passions and interests, for example, are around land stewardship, farming, and connecting to the food system as a whole. But her day-to-day nonprofit job is focused on short-term solutions around food insecurity. She sees challenges with the nonprofit system, or what she calls a “slow drip to nowhere.”

Others, like Caleb, are critical of the way some organizations are run in that they are guilty of “founder’s syndrome” or that there is a disconnect between their practices and their mission, or in the case of many non-profits, there is a real struggle for funding. He feels strongly that organizations thatengage young people need to be clearer about their mission and what they’re aiming to give, and get from, young people. Caleb also highlighted the tension he feels about many nonprofits for which “activism—food activism—is something that you’ll be compensated monetarily” for (for example, those that pay young people to work on farms). He referenced earlier movements, such as the Black Panthers and Young Lords, and how they were more motivated by bettering the community than financial benefits. He critiqued the professionalization of activism, saying that “activism and community work [are] a lot of hard work, and people should be compensated and that’s valid. But at the same time…a lot of the
work that needs to be done, you don’t have to be paid for.” This reflects the overall hesitancy among this group of young people regarding “activism” and what that means.

These activists are simultaneously describing and evaluating their work. As many of them spoke about challenges, they also justified them by describing “great moments,” such as seeing the positive impact of their work on a family or young person or simply being reminded of the larger mission and purpose. The majority also add value to their day-to-day endeavors by taking on more (unpaid) work, volunteering, and doing additional social-justice projects that are more in line with their personal goals.

Mary, for example, often volunteers and works on multiple projects. She started a youth-leadership program that works with teenagers on health and social-justice issues and is grounded in an antioppressive framework of education. She said, “I’m the type of person who…always [likes] moving forward. I don’t sit and stop. I see an opportunity and I take it.” This program is separate from her job and run on a volunteer basis. She also started her own coaching and community-building company, aimed at sparking a movement around “helping people realize that they’re good enough.” She added, “A lot of it is connected for me, just helping people feel they’re worth something and then expressing their voice so that whatever situation they’re in, if someone is being treated unjustly, if there’s oppression, they can speak out and we can all have each other’s back.” Still others have founded their own initiatives, such as community gardens and youth-internship programs, work side jobs for fair-trade organizations, or volunteer on student or rooftop farms. For everyone I spoke to (apart from current students, but they are studying food-justice-related topics), food-related work is already their full-time job. This commitment to the field beyond their nine-to-five job demonstrates a high level of motivation, driven by innate characteristics of self-determination, curiosity, and initiative, as well as a desire
to network and connect with people. And it is these traits that have helped them grow into and become leaders.

*The “practical activist” and “doing” social-justice work*

Another major theme with respect to identity is the shift away from terminology and labels like “activist” and “organizer.” The activists claim they do not want to be or do not feel comfortable being labeled. Several didn’t want to feel limited to a certain term or label, and that “organizer,” “activist,” and “advocate” don’t sufficiently tell the story. “It’s so much bigger than that,” Christine said. In her mind, it’s about sparking curiosity among young people; for others, it’s about community-building and bridging cultures and communities. Others shift their language depending on to whom they’re speaking. Anna finds that too much political jargon and professional speak can be disconnecting, particularly given that food can have such different meanings to different people. While she identifies as an urban planner, urban activist, and community organizer, she “doesn’t always like to sit in that category, because I think we all fall at risk of this siloization.” This reflects the sentiment that many shared around the disparate state of the food-justice movement and how its submovements often operate in isolation from other parts of the movement. Richard, similarly, considers himself a “comrade” among activist circles, but would classify himself more as a “navigator,” someone who is “navigating all these different systems…. It’s figuring out, How can I best serve and also honor the work that people are doing on the ground.”

In the case of responding to my recruitment letter, in which I used the term “food activist,” many admitted to “knowing” what I was looking for, even if they didn’t necessarily identify as such. Several were surprised that they were named by their friends or colleagues as “food activists.” Indeed, the way in which these young people described their activism was about
wanting to be a part of something and to work collaboratively and inclusively, and not necessarily “leading.” As Oscar explained:

Activism or activists…I just feel like it’s so isolating…. It’s just one person taking the forefront or they’re the leader, and then people follow…. But it’s really to motivate people and for them to have a turning point of “Oh, yes, this is my struggle. This is my campaign. These are my ideals: to work together as a community to implement change.” One person can’t do it alone. It’s everybody who has to take initiative to do it.

Or as Roger said, “It doesn’t really matter what you call me. You can call it whatever you want as long as you’re working for the good or some type of good.”

In general, the terminology sometimes come with “baggage” and “assumptions.” This “baggage” appears to be connected to a sense of accountability or responsibility that arises when young people describe their activism. Caleb, for example, in explaining the weight that comes with the term “organizer,” said, “There’s an assumption that you’re actually doing something, and I am not always doing something, like actively organizing.” As such, Caleb, who does youth empowerment work with an urban farm, considers his “work” separate from his organizing, or activism.

Teresa, on the other hand, highlighted the underlying implications that come with the label “community organizer,” that is, that a community necessarily needs organizing, or that the community is not organized. So while Caleb emphasized what activist means in terms of an embodied or internalized identity, Teresa focused on how others might accept or react to such labels. Thus, she is “really, really careful about vocabulary.” Esther further distinguished activism, in the sense of “pushing for [something] in particular” and “taking action,” from working in the field or, in other words, “getting people involved, education, engagement with gardens.” She identified with the latter, saying that she wouldn’t call herself an activist because she “wasn’t really keeping track of policy and advocating for something.”
In this way, there were distinctions made between activism and “doing” work, the latter being more of a form of “practical activism,” as a couple of people called it. One reason for the departure from certain terminology is that the young activists associate activism with more traditional, or public, forms of civic engagement, such as protesting, signing petitions, and going to Washington, D.C., to march or lobby. Alyssa, for example, defined activism as “feeling strongly about a social issue and taking action in one way or another.” While an observer like myself would classify Alyssa’s food-justice work as activism, based on this definition, she reserved her experiences protesting against war and advocating for LGBTQ rights as her “activist” work.

Several of the young people involved in the Occupy movement compared that type of activism (“just” protesting) with the “doing” type of activism they’re more interested and engaged in. Many young activists voiced strong support for the Occupy movement, but as Teresa said, “I had a hard time wanting to go down there to be a part of it because I was in the South Bronx every day doing work.” This is despite her feeling very politically engaged and passionate about inequality. Gail, similarly, doesn’t attend rallies, which she associates with “activism,” and also considers herself more of a “practical activist.” For her, this entails being accessible and open to the young people she works with, and being genuine in her beliefs and actions. This is important to her because she firmly believes in the potential of the food-justice movement, “if it’s inclusive” and has “the voice of young people and young people of color from low-income communities at the table, actively working in the movement.”

The activists I spoke to, therefore, want to “put into practice” what they think should be done on a larger scale. This potentially stems from the nature of food justice, which is inherently very hands-on and proactive, particularly areas like urban gardening.
The teacher, educator, mentor

There were also strong connections made between education, teaching and mentoring, and activism and social justice, whereby greater education around food and food systems is understood to be key to addressing food and health inequalities. This reflects a sense of commitment and a desire to pass and share information onto new generations. Oscar, for example, wants to be an educator and mentor, such that he can be a part of fostering and building new young leaders and the new generation of food-justice leaders. Eleanor, who’s majoring in environmental education, similarly has always wanted to be a teacher and an organizer, which she considers to be about education. She said, “I’d really like working with people and having people understand what I want people to understand and learning from people.”

For others, teaching is a means toward instilling and passing on values—around education, representation, and intergenerational learning. As Karl said, “If anything, I’m an example in my actions, and that’s what really…is going to leave a lasting effect on what people decide to do.” Many want to shape the culture of education by bringing more interactive, hands-on, and engaging learning to classrooms and programs, as they’ve found this to be more effective than traditional pedagogical approaches. Several also see opportunities for closing intergenerational gaps through urban farming and community gardening projects. And Denise, who considers herself “a conscious person who’s active,” identifies with activism within the work she does but also feels a responsibility about educating her own family. As part of this work, she wants to forge a connection with young people by letting them see someone who looks like them in the classroom.

Some of their desire to be educators stems from negative experiences with the school system while growing up. Caleb, after studying Africana studies in college, wanted to become a
teacher. “After I took History of Africa courses, I was like, *What the eff? Why [didn’t I learn] this stuff in high school and middle school?”* he said. This sparked his thinking about education and young people. Caleb’s goal is to “cultivate and grow a culture of resistance where people know what the deal is and how grave the situation is. In my case, we’re talking about issues with the food and the climate…. We need social movements and real organizing.” In five years, his plan is to “find some kind of meaningful social-movement organization…that reflects my values and the work that I’m going to be doing.”

Several activists spoke about wanting to teach through writing and are already blogging about food and food systems in order to teach others, have a space to self-reflect, and make information more readily accessible. Mary, whose approach to activism includes teaching, shared power, and shared learning through an antioppressive lens, plans to write a book about food justice for social workers. This mirrors the findings in the previous chapter that education, in their eyes, isn’t just about teaching someone to increase fruit and vegetable consumption. It’s about building leadership; teaching about history, systems, and race; increasing access to information; and fostering critical self-reflection.

* Becoming an “authentic” self

Language and labels aside, embodying and enacting one’s commitments and desires is a paramount goal for many of these young activists. This includes becoming more comfortable with and confident in oneself, challenging others, growing into one’s own politics, and, as Eleanor said, eventually learning that “it’s okay to voice your opinion even if it’s against what mainstream culture is.” This relates to the theme of education and mentoring and the challenge of building ones confidence in the ability to teach and connect with others. Richard, for example, struggles with his identity as an activist with respect to activity on social media. He shared his
concern with perception, that there is a level of pressure to be “of use” and “not waste people’s time” when it comes to creating an “authentic” digital persona that is grounded in activism and action. He said:

I guess I feel a little bit intimidated by [social media] because I definitely look up to a lot of the people on there, and if I was going to put something [up], I would want to be correct and have it be something that had value that was worth their time…. I want to come with something…like a kernel that’s going to be helping people think through things better or change their day, change their worldview, change their lens. If it’s not that then, is this really worth really putting up there? I think that the authenticity is something that I struggle with in that I don’t want to come off as a bullshit activist…. I admire people who are so courageous to put everything up.

This sentiment brings to mind the poem by Marge Piercy, To Be of Use, which is in part a celebration of hard work(ers), and the value of persistence, determination, and intention. In her poem, she starts by saying, “The people I love the best / jump into work head first / without dallying in the shallows / and swim off with sure strokes almost out of sight,” and ends with “The pitcher cries for water to carry / and a person for work that is real.” This certainly rings true with Richard’s notion of authenticity which is tied to embracing identity and knowledge with confidence and conviction, and actively choosing work that has value, and that’s “real.”

While the majority are convicted in their desire to work in food justice long-term, some are on the fence and wracked with a bit of uncertainty. For example, Esther is passionate about food justice but is also interested in reproductive rights and queer issues. “And then there’s still that nagging feeling that everything intersects,” she said. What she is sure of, though, is her desire to find a job she really loves, that she can learn from, and that she cares about. For Esther and others, the choice of work is a reflection of their authenticity.

There were only a few instances where involvement with food justice has explicitly led to the pursuit of other relevant social-justice interests. Eleanor was always interested in food justice and environmental issues. As she got more involved with the work, she started moving away
from “food is the answer”–type approaches and dug deeper into understanding how the system runs. That led her to become involved with organizing around corporate money and politics and to develop a keener understanding of issues around the wealth gap and monetary distribution. Through this process, she worked with others to find viable and actionable solutions. She recognized it wasn’t easy to “cut corporate money out of politics…. That’s just reinforcing capitalism.” So she learned about divestment campaigns and the 1990s movement to battle apartheid. And after attending several talks, she has become closely involved with the fossil fuel divestment movement. Eleanor’s story illustrates a process of growth as an activist and a continual process of self-reflection and analysis. Over time, she’s grown more critically aware of systemic issues.

Telling the Story: A Narrative Analysis of “Doing Social Justice”

The preceding section illustrated the perspectives on activist identities among young people within their social-justice and activism careers. This section presents a closer examination of two narratives and the ways in which the stories are performed. It is important to note that the themes described in this section are informed by the whole of the narratives.

Using a dialogic/performative approach to analyzing the narratives, this section examines what the narratives of young people tell us about youth engagement within the context of the food-justice movement. I will highlight their stories—in their words—of work, social justice, and identity, and what “work” means in the context of “doing” social justice. Specifically, I use these two examples to illustrate how the narratives are performed, focusing first and foremost on the storytelling aspect and how young people narrate their stories, as opposed to the content of the stories themselves. This follows Riessman’s approach to the performance of narrative, where “if thematic and structural approaches interrogate ‘what’ is spoken and ‘how,’ the
dialogic/performative approach asks ‘who’ an utterance may be directed to, ‘when,’ and why, that is, for what purposes?”  

It also touches upon Polletta’s emphasis on pulling out the plot, point of view, and “narrativity,” or linkages between action and effect, of a narrative. The focus on plot is about adding meaning to an event, otherwise “events would be mere occurrences.”  

This relates to the need to situate an event within its context, or within the larger, broader story, in this case, the dynamics of the food-justice movement.

Here, I argue that among young food activists, there is a spectrum to the extent to which activism comes from a self-reflective space. Like in the example of Oscar, we see much more weaving in and out between family, history, lived experiences, and current work, where the links between food, family, and career are integral and intrinsic to the construction of his identity. There is a strong concordance between his calling and career path, and it is specific to food. His narrative begins with who he is, where he grew up, and his family upbringing, and is driven by experiencing inequality or injustice or for others, recognition of privilege. This is also further framed and contextualized by the form of their participation in the food-justice movement, which is on a more structural and global level. Additionally, these narratives are fraught with more tension and anger.

For others, like Gail, their narrative is a bit more neatly and “professionally” packaged like a CV, with less tension and frustration. Their narratives have a more linear trajectory and start with the topic of interest—the environment, food, nutrition, etc.—as opposed to their identity. Among all, there is a strong desire to have an impact and seek work that is meaningful and value-based, food being central to this discourse. But in this subset, the narrative is structured more around seeking a career that interests them and less about a “calling” or a “mission.” Food justice and food activism provide an opportunity for work that matches their
interests and the nature of the work they want. There is greater acceptance in the process and a more individualized, localized approach to making change.

These two stories illustrate the range in the connection between the personal narrative and the greater food-justice-movement narrative, as well as the complicated space between activism as a profession with or without being rooted and grounded in history and structure. This spectrum to some extent supports Valocchi’s examination of the life history of activists in Hartford, Connecticut. He found differences in conceptions of activists’ identity by class, by which middle-class activists situated their activism within a professionalized identity; working-class activists as a “calling” closely linked to a reinvention of their working-class origins; and low-income activists as a “way of life,” as their activism weaves between collective action and economic and social disadvantage.166 Those he spoke to were ages 21 to 60 and engaged in a range of social-justice areas (e.g., issues of labor, peace, LGBTQ, feminism). While the narratives in this dissertation touch upon many of these aspects—stories of career pathways, callings, and ways of life—the distinction by class is not as clear among those I spoke to. This may be because my sample is younger, and, as such, their work trajectories are potentially in a more nascent, developmental state than those of people in their 40s and 50s. The different contexts of social justice broadly and food justice specifically in New York City compared to Hartford may also play a role.

Oscar: “Life is political. I definitely identify with that...”

Oscar is an example of someone who presents a narrative that is very much consolidated and connected to the larger narrative of food sovereignty. Oscar is 24 years old, lives in Brooklyn, and works for a youth-led organization that supports college students who are organizing more sustainable food models on campus. His role is to provide support, mentoring,
and leadership development to students in the region. In his words, he is “your person, your support system to tell you it’s going to be okay and that this is just part of the process. You know? Our ultimate vision and goal [is to show you that] ultimately you’re the person who has the power and voice to help create this.” “This” refers to the dismantling of oppression within the food system, which he hopes to do through educating young people, supporting their struggles, and shifting money to local economies. Oscar acts in a leadership role and works to empower the next generation of food-justice leaders.

Oscar’s storytelling about his work and how he ended up doing what he now does comes from deep within himself. Throughout our interview, he often shifted with ease between his personal story and that of the greater movement he’s working within. A clear example of this is in his definition of food justice, which brings in both the personal…

Being a working-class, transgender, queer person in New York, having access to affordable and organic global foods…

…and the political:

To the history of how destructive our food system is…starting from…African slavery to pushing indigenous-first people out of their land for us to start our agricultural system to how destructive the food corporations are with producing large amounts of food and exploiting [sic] people and animals and earth, environmentally.

Oscar’s goal of dismantling oppression within the food system stems directly from his roots and the experiences he and his family have endured. It’s about seeking justice, but also about hard work and the American dream of being self-sufficient. When asked how he got to doing what he does, he started by immediately, and with certainty, telling me where he grew up and about his family.

Oscar comes from a family of first-generation working-class immigrants from El Salvador and Mexico. His parents came to the United States through the bracero policy, a guest-
worker program that brought Mexican laborers to work within the mining, agricultural, and railroad industries. They worked from 1942 to 1964, during which the Harvest of Shame, which exposed the plight of migrant agricultural workers, was documented and publicized. His father was a food-service worker, and his mother was a domestic worker. Both were ultimately deported to Mexico. They are now living in the U.S., but both are disabled and unable to work (his dad is unable to walk, and his mom recently had back surgery). Oscar is responsible for supporting and taking care of his family; he was one of a few respondents for whom this is true. When describing his new job as a community organizer, he talked about the challenges of being self-sustainable while maintaining a level of self-care:

Being able to support myself with the wages that I get, not having a safety net, and supporting my parents financially, that’s really challenging for me. Ultimately, I feel a lot of support with Americanization, with making my work possible. But as for being financially self-sustainable, it’s really challenging. [I worry] every day, like How am I going to support my parents and meet the rent?

I asked to hear more about how he got into the social- and food-justice world, and he continued to share stories about his family and upbringing. Oscar grew up in “a pretty rough” neighborhood in Brooklyn. His siblings were both involved with gangs, and his brother dropped out of high school and became a parent at 19 years old. His brother, however, subsequently became a youth organizer, and with his faith-based background, inspired young people in the neighborhood to leave the gang community. Oscar then watched his brother become a food-service worker in the World Trade Center. His brother “loved having something that would give him hope that he was someone from our own community that was not choosing a route of being a youth involved in different things that are messed up.”

Oscar’s brother made a huge impression on him when he was an adolescent. Indeed, one of Oscar’s “critical moments” was when his brother passed away on 9/11. Seeing what his
brother went through subsequently led Oscar down a path of reflection and questioning. After his brother died, Oscar began asking himself questions like “Did we end up just being working class? What does that mean? Did my brother really have to be involved in gangs to feel supported and to feel pressured to work in a huge corporate industry to make a living?” These questions, in concert with his experience doing solidarity work with an LGBTQ organization in Mexico – which is where he first learned to feel “comfortable in [his] own skin” – led him to seek meaning in his job and think about and want to connect with his parents’ history with forced migration, their farmworker background, and their pressure to move to the U.S. He explained:

Life is political. I definitely identify with that…. Food does affect me personally, but it’s deeply ingrained in my roots and my history. That’s why food justice is really important to me, where I felt four years ago that I wanted to be involved and was really passionate about it and questioned my own history, too.

Oscar’s desire to connect with his parents’ history and his own cultural background is in line with recent research on immigrant youth in the U.S. and how “cultural motives,” be it the motivation to “remember and maintain values and customs of their culture” or to “ensure or enhance the well-being of their fellow immigrants or compatriots,” account for a major source of civic and political engagement. For Oscar, it was about figuring out how his family got to the U.S. and wanting to seek work that would enable a “healing process.” We also saw this deep connection to culture and ethnicity among immigrant and first-generation activists when examining their food voices and food memories. In these cases, there is also a bridging of an immigrant’s culture and American society with respect to food behaviors, where many retain the pride of their culture but also experiment with and incorporate American (or, specifically, New York City) “foodie” behaviors.

Oscar’s description of the way he navigates work and family, and the meaning of work vis-à-vis family, demonstrates a high level of self-reflection. Additionally, his path and trajectory
is very intentional. He didn’t stumble across this type of work—he actively sought out meaningful and relevant opportunities that allowed him to connect with his personal history and his family’s farmworker background. He worked with a network of farmworkers and young people in solidarity with the Coalition of Immokalee Workers, a worker-based human rights organization that addresses social responsibility, human trafficking, and gender-based violence in the workplace. He also found deep connections with community gardening in a western neighborhood of Brooklyn.

I worked [in] a community garden…with first-generation immigrants from Latin America and Mexico doing farming and raising chickens. It was really powerful for me to be involved because it was the neighborhood I grew up in, too—going back and being part of the community that exists there, compared to growing up there.

I asked Oscar why he thought young people were beginning to care about food and food justice. He responded by talking about how he sees a lot of disconnect between people and their food, and young people are becoming interested in where food comes from, how local economies can be supported, and how they can be a part of the process of creating a better food system. He also said he’s aware of the stigma that exists “that young people don’t know what they want, that they’re immature, that they don’t have a sense of the world like others do.” In reaction to this, Oscar brings us back in history, citing the role of young people in social movements, such as the United Farm Worker movement, or the fight against segregation in schools. He talks about an awareness that’s building in which young people are recognizing they are the targets of corporations and consumerism. “I want to push back against that, because I’m the one that’s being targeted…and I’m the person with a voice and power that I can help create that change.”

His narrative is thus inspired and shaped by his peers, historical leaders and movements, his current role models, and fellow activists, and for him, the fight and the work is personal.
Oscar’s deeply reflective understanding of his self, and the social construction of his self, resonates in harmony with Zussman’s call that “we must pay as much attention to the social structures that produce autobiographical narratives as to the narratives themselves.”\(^{130}\) Oscar finds meaning in his work; it is a way for him to reconnect with the social structures that shaped his life. He is also in disbelief that he has found a job and a career—“[a] paid organizing job”—that matches his beliefs, values, and passions. Indeed, for Oscar, work is a career and a calling.

When asked how he describes himself, apropos of activism, he explained that he considers himself as more of an “educator” or “mentor” and less as an “activist” or “leader.” His desire is to “be part of educating new leaders or young leaders” and to support the “next food justice generation.” Oscar firmly believes in community, that “one person can’t do it alone. It’s everybody who has to take initiative to do it.” This is inspired in part by the work and words of Audre Lorde.

So me and a colleague and a student, we ran our Power, Privilege and Food Justice Oppression workshop, [and] we added this Audre Lorde quote. It starts with…“without community there is no liberation.” [It basically says] we have to acknowledge the differences and embrace that, and without that there is no liberation. I was doing a facilitation rundown with the co-facilitator, and while we were going through the workshop, she read that quote out loud. For me, it was a really big moment to hear her say that, and she’s like, “Wow, this is such a beautiful quote.” It’s so nice that someone wrote about this, and it so connects to our work in Food Justice.

A large part of his approach to education and activism is through storytelling. Oscar shares his story with the young people he trains. He also talks about his work “all the time” with his students; his partner, who is also an urban farmer; and his family. When he told me this, I thought, this must be why he performed his narrative with such ease and comfort. And on my part, I did not have to do as much probing as with other interviews – our interview was more about storytelling, than interviewing. I asked what his most vivid memory of food justice work is so far.
I think [it has to be] one of my first interactions with the Coalition of Immokalee Workers. They have a 24-foot truck [that] is a replica of a modern-day slavery case [where] farmworkers were being held captive [as] modern-day slaves to a contractor. They would work 12 hours a day, six days a week or seven days a week, without any pay, unable to take breaks. They would be chained up in a U-Haul truck and, you know, in the darkness without any bathrooms…. [The museum] has…a lot of resources and education of what the process was like. That was my first introduction to remember, *Okay, we have this concept that slavery ended in 1865, but it’s still happening.* To [know that there’s] a high price to that tomato I’m eating—coming from that to now, a few years later, working with students to share this story [and] experience and to see where the next food generation goes…. Yeah, I think that’s my memory of coming from that to being where I’m at now.

Oscar’s narrative is, as illustrated, grounded in self-reflection and growth. His story weaves between the personal and the political, and he acknowledges food and food justice on individual, community, and policy levels. Oscar is an activist whose personal story and experience with injustice is inextricably linked to broader systemic inequalities and whose trajectory is very much intentional. It is about his own story as much as it is about others.

*Gail: the “practical activist”*

Gail is an example of an activist who “fell into” food justice and is motivated more by the nature and context of the job, although positive and reaffirming childhood experiences with food and the environment are arguably crucial. Gail is 30 and white, has a master’s degree in environmental science, and lives in Brooklyn with her boyfriend. She just started a job with an organization that does professional development and training programs with young people living in public housing with the goal of getting them into jobs in the clean-energy sector or urban agriculture. She admits it’s not the kind of work she wants to do long-term. “I’m not really an office person,” she said. Rather, she prefers more education- and hands-on youth-development work, which is what she used to do. When I asked about her previous food justice work, which was in urban agriculture, she said:
I was really excited about the position because since I’ve lived in New York, I’ve worked either for organizations that do workforce development work or for organizations that do urban agriculture and education-related work. And so this position really married those two things that I was sort of seeing as parallel tracks, and they finally crossed. It was workforce development but using urban agriculture as a tool to move young people into steady jobs in the workforce. So it was an ideal position, and it an awesome experience and job.

In the end, the poorly organized management structure of that job led her to look for other work. Here, we see that Gail’s response focused more on the job and less on her “calling” or passion, as we saw with Oscar. We further see this in her definition of food justice, which, when I asked for a definition, she seemed caught off guard, replying, “oh, hard questions.” After some pause, she began, weaving narratives of employment with the larger, political movement, but with little mention of the personal.

Food justice, I think, has to do with giving the control of our food system back to people and communities and taking it away from corporations, and doing that in a way that’s really inclusive of all different kinds of people and especially of the people who have been most damaged…so low-income communities of color especially. And I think that part of what I noticed working with [this organization] was that what we said our mission was and how we were actively engaging the community didn’t always [jibe]…for me anyway. I felt like we were saying we were doing this kind of food justice, but then we weren’t really operating in a way that was inclusive in bringing different, alternative perspectives to the table and making sure that the community…is represented in a way that’s really just and proportional to what the population is.

Like Oscar, Gail’s storytelling about her work is self-reflective and demonstrates a level of critical consciousness around the movement. She is critical of how nonprofits operate; analyzes food justice in terms of sustainability, power, and ownership; and is passionate about addressing the disparities within food justice and how young people and young people of color are underrepresented. That said, how she ended up doing what she now does was laid out in a less politically and emotionally fraught path than Oscar’s. Gail also starts her narrative by attributing her work to her family—to exploring the woods in her backyard, going on camping trips, and being raised with a “strong appreciation for life and natural systems and our
ecosystem.” Therefore, the “practical” and “professional” approach to work is nurtured by early and positive childhood experiences, in particular, with the environment. Injustices in her family history play less of an influencing role.

My mom was really into [environmental conservation] and was very much a proponent of nature and kids being outside. So we spent a lot of time going on nature walks and things when we were kids, and wading into retention ponds to clean trash out because the sandhill cranes were nesting in there.

This sparked Gail’s interest in environmental conservation, which branched out to environmental justice in college after she “found [her] people” within her university’s environmental club. From here, Gail presents a chronological description of her trajectory, as though going through a CV. After graduating from college with a degree in environmental studies (with a short stint in music education, which she was not passionate enough about), Gail applied to various jobs and fellowships—“I didn't know what I was doing, and I sort of randomly started applying for any job that had an environment-related title.” She spoke about her first job in urban agriculture, which was interning at a greenhouse in the city that held education programs. This ultimately turned into a full-time job. She then went to graduate school for geography, and she took a memorable course called Food and Famine. While working her full-time greenhouse job, she volunteered at a community garden in her neighborhood.

Gail couldn’t remember exactly what sparked her interest in food, but she recalled reading more about food systems (like many others, The Omnivore’s Dilemma played an influential role), learning about urban farmers, and began noticing the burgeoning urban-farming movement in the city. She reflected on becoming a vegetarian as a teenager out of compassion for animals and her family’s “strong food culture,” but it was through reading, learning, and coursework that she “really thought about [food] as a system that has so much potential to impact everything.” Through these experiences, she realized that “urban farming…is such a great tool to
impact the earth in a positive way, [to] make positive social changes but in a super-tangible way that [is] inclusive.” This all coalesced around the time Occupy was picking up. It sparked her interest in the way social movements take off and grow.

As we see here, Gail was driven initially by the process of exploration and guided by work and volunteer opportunities, whereas with Oscar, there was more of a proactive search for meaningful work that was connected to his past experience with injustice. This demonstrates earlier findings that there are multiple, interlocking pathways people take to becoming actively involved in food and social justice. Both Oscar and Gail, however, were also driven to youth-related work because of the role and potential of young people to inspire and bring about social change. Gail said:

It’s great to change someone’s life, but it’s also changing their life in a way that’s really positive for society and for the planet. And if I had the potential to spark people’s interest and inspire them enough with my own [passion]…that’s what I feel my calling is and what I’ve always wanted to do. I care so deeply about the planet and food systems that I just want to pay that forward, because I think the only way things really change is through really small changes [on a] grassroots level and individuals changing, and then that rippling out to their families and their communities…. I think the government sometimes does good things, but I think it can’t do good things and be really successful unless communities are really actively moving toward [being] self-sustaining.

This statement connects with one of her most vivid memories, which was seeing the direct impact of her work on the young people she worked with.

We were building the farm, so for the first two months solid, we were moving soil with shovels and wheel barrels, smoothing the soil, building the raised beds. It was horrible labor. They were so miserable. And then the first time we actually transplanted plants, this amazing Zen fell over everyone. And one of them—this young woman who is an amazing young person; she... used to weigh 250 pounds, [and] she lost all this weight—she just had this amazing personal transformation in the program. She looked up from transplanting, and [said], “Oh, Gail, I realize why you’ve been telling us to keep going. I finally get it. This is so peaceful, and I feel so…it just feels great.”

Here we see Gail talking about her “calling” and her passions, but her identity is less embodied, or integrated, in the narrative. She critically reflects on the work and the movement
and how it operates, but the way she shares her story—her performance—is less about “her” story and how she fits into the food-justice movement and more about the work, be it the process or the outcome.

This is also illustrated by the way she identifies as an activist, which differs largely from the way Oscar does. While they are both committed to their work within the movement, Gail admitted to being surprised that her friend named her as a food-justice activist. She said:

I’m definitely a person who undersells [myself] and the work [I] do. And it’s always “Oh, no, I’m not that person. I’m just doing this.” It’s so weird to think of myself as an activist, but then when…I emailed you, I was totally not sure if I was the person you were looking for. I would totally say [Caleb] is the person you’re looking for. So the fact that he referred me must say something, but I was like, “I don’t think I’m the person.”

Gail’s narrative is not as much about “being” the movement as it is about “doing” social justice work. As with others, she distinguishes “activism” from what she calls “practical activism.”

I’m not really a person who goes to tons of rallies and things like that, [which], in my mind, I associate with activism. I think I’m much more like a practical activist. I try to stay really open to all of the young people that I work with. I tell them that they can reach out to me at any point. I respond to their emails always. I’m really excited to follow up on them and to hear about their work, and to really walk my walk, not just talk my talk, not just be the person who says I believe in food justice and then doesn’t know the kids’ names and the kids in the program. They’re all real individuals who have so much potential, and so I just want to be really open to supporting them.

Gail’s work is about educating, mentoring, and, like Oscar, fostering the leadership of young people. In talking about how her identity has transformed over time, she recognized that she now has “way more tools in [her] toolkit [than before] for ways to actively push community outreach work and youth-development work and training” as well as practical skills of growing food. But she also “has more growing to do.” This is reminiscent of Valocchi’s findings, in which middle-class activists frame their narrative around training, internships, and skill development.166
For nearly half the young activists, their stories infused and tied together their personal and their movement narratives more seamlessly. They also emphasized to a greater extent what Cadieux and Slocum call the food-justice trauma “node” of organizing, that is, the acknowledgement of the “historical, collective trauma, and persistent race, gender, and class inequality.” Those who narrated their food-justice work around the node of trauma, however, are not only those who have lived experiences of trauma. They either narrated about their lived experiences of trauma/injustice or about their recognition of their own privilege. Not surprisingly, they also placed more emphasis on “food sovereignty” and goals of addressing structural inequalities, than “food justice,” and more local-level strategies. This may be shaped by the work they do and the discourses embedded within that work. There’s also a level of self-reflection and introspective analysis that’s happening throughout each narrative; their activism is fueled a bit more by frustration, either with the movement or with the organization they work with, or their own personal experiences with injustice. As such, their stories and activism are, to a greater extent, situated within structural and historical frameworks.

For more than a third of the activists, their story took on a more “professionalized” approach to social justice. The description of their trajectory is CV-like and follows more of a logical and chronological order of their volunteerism and work and how one experience led to another and propelled them into this work. More often this was among those who come from a history of privilege, as opposed to a history of struggle and oppression. There was less self-reflection among this group and less detailed discussion of issues around trauma and race, but there was indeed critical reflection about the movement as a whole.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, those who share their narrative on a more regular basis—for training purposes, fundraising, recruitment, or advocacy—seem to have better-developed,
articulate stories. Or, they seemed more comfortable and confident while telling their story. This is perhaps because they have had additional opportunities to reflect on their story and “explore potential identity commitments.” Or as Giddens might posit, their self-identity has reached a certain level of “stability.”

This also speaks to the coproduction aspect of interviewing, in that interviews are co-constructed between interviewer and interviewee. Acknowledging the role of the audience also helps tell us “how narrators want to be known, and how they involve the audience in ‘doing’ their identities.” In the case of Oscar and Gail, my role as listener differed. Oscar engaged with me more as a colleague or ally, or rather, we engaged with each other more informally and collegially. On multiple occasions, he expressed excitement and gratitude for being included in the study. He also asked about my work, and specifically acknowledged my decade of experience. At the end of the interview, he confided in me, off the record, about his plans with school. On the other hand, Gail was more hesitant about being included, and had several questions about her eligibility. Interestingly, the same interviewee connected me with both Gail and Oscar. Gail positioned me more as an interviewer and a researcher, commenting on the difficulty of some questions, and apologizing for not remembering some information. These differences in performance, however, are, as demonstrated, not mutually exclusive of their commitment and self-reflection.

**Lessons from Young Food Activists**

With a greater understanding of how young people become food activists and the ways in which they identify and perform their activist narrative, this section seeks to understand how we as public health practitioners can better engage young people in food- and social-justice work. I asked each person to reflect on their journey and experiences and to offer specific advice,
strategies, and tools for this subject. Much of their advice aligned with recommendations from
the literature, but suggestions that come directly from young activists is limited, to my
knowledge. This section summarizes the recommendations that the interviewees made to public
health, youth development, and food justice organizations, that want to engage young people in
food activism. The recommendations are: to meet young people where they are, provide hands-
on, practical learning experiences, shift power dynamics and build leaders, and promote the use
of narratives and stories for movement building and self-reflection.

Meet them where they are, but be provocative and challenging

A common theme that arose when asked what we can do to better engage young people
in food justice was the importance of meeting young people where they are. To these activists,
this entails two main aspects: relationship building and shared conversation. Relationship
building refers to the kinship one develops and fosters with young people and the need to really
listen to and take them seriously, show them respect, and try to understand both who they are and
where they’re coming from. Several activists discussed how crucial it is to create an environment
in which young people feel comfortable expressing and being themselves and where they are in
their social comfort zone. These relationships can also be nurtured through mentoring and
teaching skills, and they act as a foundation for building respect and responsibility, as well as
teaching knowledge and skills around food.

The second aspect entails the nature of conversation and discussion, which must be
relatable, relevant, and tailored to the interests of the target audience. As Gail said, “Talk about
something that they can latch onto and connect with and relate to…. And don’t be judgmental.”
Here, she refers to a safe space that needs to be created. Caleb also spoke of the need to learn and
understand what excites young people, using that as a starting point. For example, bringing
young people to a farm is the first step. He explained, “If the young person is excited about growing food for his or her community, then that’s a beautiful thing. And it’s often an entry point into understanding more structural issues.” Several others added that the discussion of food could be expanded across disciplines and far beyond nutrition—such as in economics, business, history, science, and the arts. In this way, public health practitioners can take time to find out what is unique to each person about food justice.

However, while relevance is important for bringing young people into a conversation and sparking interest, equally significant is the willingness to “go to unlikely places” and be provocative and challenging, which are key to sustaining participation and interest. Mary described her process when working with young people. She starts with simple, open questions (e.g., “What comes to mind when you think of health?”) and from there continues to dig deeper, probing into what they think about their health on a personal level and also on a community level. In her experience, this progression ultimately has helped shift the conversation to being about power and who has the power to do something about problems in their community.

Another element of meeting people where they are is finding the right people to engage with. Anna explained, “Sometimes you also have to start with those who are already interested to some extent. The more people you have who are interested and excited, the more likely they can then pull in people who are on the fence or curious…. Get your best friend to come; try and convince them that it’s cool.” She does this through “food ambassadors,” who are older youth who take the ideas for their projects and speak to their broader communities about them as a way to spread messages and empower young people.
Provide hands-on and experiential learning

In addition to tailoring and targeting activities and discussions to the desired audience, the type of activity is also crucial to consider. By far the most widely discussed strategy for encouraging youth participation and engagement was the importance of “doing” something, that is, providing hands-on, experiential learning, particularly for younger children, versus a more didactic approach and merely talking about it. This harkens back to notions promoted by educational theorist John Dewey, namely that learning based in the experiential and the interactive is more effective at promoting growth as compared to traditional pedagogical models that approach the matter as though students had no prior experience to draw from to inform their own learning. This method of learning is at the heart of most urban agriculture and youth-based food-justice programs, for which learning about food necessitates a hands-on and interactive experience.

As such, it is no surprise that many of the young activists recommended fun and creative opportunities for engaging young people, teaching them how to grow and cook food, and then pairing these experiences with interactions with people and communities. Naomi emphasized that hands-on experiences are important, but finding a way to make the learning memorable is just as, if not more, critical. For younger children, this could be through songs, dances, and other interactive tools. Additionally, science, math, and other subjects can very easily be brought from within the school walls out to the garden. For older children, a train-the-trainer model, where they are trained to teach other peers or younger children, has been found to reinforce learning, ensure knowledge is “owned,” and build leadership skills, which was echoed by several young activists. These intergenerational projects also help to create connections and ties within communities.
Others also highlighted that this type of learning can help ensure young people are invested in the work, the movement, and the program. Esther described how the combination of a lot of critical discussion and analysis with an interactive application of what they discussed was a powerful approach to learning. This also helps foster a much deeper understanding from the ground up. As she said:

You talk about something, but then you do it because you have to feel it…. You really need to do something with it for it to feel real, then to realize that you can make a difference with it in a way that’s more personal or more relevant than the typical community service that you do as a young person.

Several highlighted the impact of “transformative trips.” Roger, for example, recalled the positive impact of traveling to and attending food-justice conferences as an intern at the urban farm, an opportunity that he and many others would not have had access to otherwise. He said:

I went to the Rooted in Community Conference in D.C., the Community Food Security Conference in Milwaukee…those experiences of going places when I was like, wow, I didn't know you could travel. I'd never been to those places, never had the opportunity to. Outside of the program, I wouldn't have had the opportunity to go to those places or even see most of the country the way I’ve seen it. It was things like that, those rare opportunities that most young people don't have access to. Our public school system is completely underfunded, it's completely under-worked and undermanned, understaffed, under-supported, and you need programs like [this one] to really help young people get a complete learning experience.

Eleanor, as well, firmly believes in transformative trips. Her experience with finding ways for privileged kids to understand and see the privilege they have, and to then empower them to do something positive with that privilege, has had a significant effect. It is through such opportunities for young people that they can be taught skills and critical thinking through community-service activities, with the goal of bringing these skills back to their own community. It’s also about creating opportunities for young people to meet, talk to, and work with other young people, and then “connect on a human level around food.”
Shift power and promote a participatory and democratic place

Closely related to the themes of hands-on experiences and meeting young people where they are is the importance of shifting power to young people and promoting open, inclusive, participatory, and democratic spaces and places. This shift to putting youth at the center and nurturing these relationships also needs to start early. Oscar put it simply when he said we need to “be sure that students and young people feel that they have ownership over what they’re doing…that they’re actually the people who are initiating it and creating change.” Caleb shared an example of this. He co-designed a community food assessment with young people, who then came up with solutions and actions. The young people were excited, he said, because “they felt like they had a little bit more power over the decision-making.” It also fostered creativity and problem-solving. He emphasized that we cannot just teach abstract concepts without linking them to something concrete. Caleb also shared a fantasy of his – to start a youth worker food co-operative that’s owned and run by young people, and “reflects a democracy and is participatory.” He sees this as an opportunity to provide good jobs that are mission-oriented.

The young activists I spoke with offered strategies for creating an environment that fosters shifting power to young people. Teresa stated that we need to “steer clear of making assumptions” about youth, racial groups, and socioeconomic groups. Rather, by treating people as a blank slate, we can begin to instill and embody “internal power.” She added, “A lot of internal power means not using power. It means being humble and confident and aware and calm…as opposed to…having power over others.” This relates closely to Irena’s approach, which emphasizes the importance of building authentic relationships. To do so, requires a deep understanding of yourself, your assumptions, and shortfalls and an acceptance of other people’s truths – which starts with asking challenging and provoking questions. In the context of food, for
many of these young activists, engaging with young people means pushing beyond nutrition and cooking skills. They emphasize that it’s necessary to generate awareness about the oppression of young people by soda makers, corporations, big businesses, and marketers, and really put the issue of justice front and center. Along these lines, there was also recognition among many young people that there isn’t just one solution to the issues around food justice—for example, that farmer’s markets aren’t the solution, that a single youth-led organization isn’t the solution. Instead, it’s about providing opportunities in which young people can see and experience different models that collectively might be the answer.

Young people must also have opportunities to become leaders. Leadership as a process and an outcome is critical to fostering youth engagement and participation. As young people are a necessary part of the food-justice movement, they should not be considered “tangential” or secondary. “Teenagers want leadership. They want recognition,” said Eleanor. From a programmatic or organizational standpoint, it is imperative to avoid tokenistic behavior; that is, we must give young people opportunities to make decisions and lead within an organization, “not just, like, saying, ‘Oh yeah, we’re getting your opinion and then not taking any of that opinion and not bringing it into the work,’” as Gail stated.

*Use narratives and stories*

We’ve already explored the use and analysis of narrative in the context of identity development and performance. But narratives can also be a powerful means of engaging audiences emotionally, cognitively, and personally, creating connections and shaping the behavior and outcomes of those who take part and receive. This aspect of narrative arose as a theme when discussing strategies for fostering youth engagement. It also closely relates to
meeting young people where they are and the importance of understanding who they are and where they come from—and, as such, extracting and seeking narratives and stories from others.

Anna said her approach to working with young people involves listening to their story and learning about their interests and why they’ve decided to work on a farm. She told me about the time she was turning compost with two high school students and asked one of them “Why did you come here?” The student went on to talk about his family and how his grandmother in Jamaica had a garden and would tell him stories about it all the time. When he visited Jamaica for the first time, he got to see the garden. The student told Anna, “It was really awesome. And it was beautiful, but there were so many problems. And I see those problems here.” I, too, heard similar stories speaking to the young people on the farm where I worked—and several of those young people also had connections to farms in the Dominican Republic or Jamaica. As Kevin shared:

I work on a farm. And since my family and background and friends and everything [are] Caribbean, it’s cool to go back to them and let them know that when they were younger, they was working on a farm, and now I’m young and I’m an American and I’m working on a farm. An organic farm, I should say.

For Silas, working on a farm is about feelings of home “’cause where I grew up in Jamaica, it was very rural, right? There [were] lots of plants, mango trees, oranges. And the farm in a way just reminded me of Jamaica a little bit. So it’s kind of…a reminder of home in a way.”

Getting young people to share their narrative can serve as a tool for self-reflection as well as for cultivating a deeper understanding of the roots and foundations of youth development. A quick conversation in a group setting may generate reasons such as the need for money or wanting to be with friends, but one-on-one conversations through the use of narrative can reveal much more—such as the role of family, cultural ties, and memories of home. And it is this process that can, for many, help build and foster a sense of community. This can also serve to
build relationships, which requires a level of self-reflection on the part of the youth allies. Irena explained:

The hard part [of doing this work] is building authentic relationships. In order to do that, you have to have an understanding of yourself and where you fall short and maybe where you have assumptions and where they don’t necessarily mesh. Being willing to accept other people’s truths—you don’t have to accept them as your own but [be] accepting that that’s their truth and that’s where they’re coming from…. You have to live in a questioning state.

The other use of narrative that arose was to share one’s own story in the context of organizing, training, and outreach. Oscar shares his personal journey and story during training sessions to find and foster connections. He also holds one-on-one meetings with young people to learn about their own stories. “I carry my story on my sleeve,” Alyssa said, as a way to share how she identifies with food justice issues, the community, and the people she’s working with. Eleanor, as well, spoke at length about the power of narratives, particularly when it comes to organizing. For her, organizing around food justice is “one-to-one, person-to-person relationship organizing,” where she has personal connections to the people she’s reaching out to. “I could name the people I need to do outreach to,” she said. This is in contrast to the Occupy-type work she does, which is more “movement-driven. These people are drawn by a greater narrative to engage in something.” Eleanor went on to say:

What I’ve learned from those two different types of organizing is the power of the personal narrative and explaining where you’ve come from and why you do what you do. I think that always having a personal narrative and then a greater narrative of the movement or narrative of the organization or farm or whatever, being able to connect those two [is important]. I would say my greatest advice when you talk about organizing is coming up with your own narrative: why you do what you do and how that relates to other people.

Thus, for Eleanor, narrative serves several purposes. It is for connecting to others, connecting to the larger movement, and developing a sense of self and identity through the process of finding and narrating one’s own story. This finding resonates strongly with that of
narrative and identity research—that “narrative processing reflects commitments and can promote greater consistency between those commitments and behaviors.”  

These recommendations in many ways echo the principles (and persistent challenges and dilemmas) of community-based participatory research (CBPR), particularly those focused on engaging communities and young people, shifting power, and relationship building. These require ample time, flexibility, and resources to implement. How then, can these recommendations be useful to public health practitioners who are interested in collaborating with young people on issues around food justice, when historically, some of these approaches have been fraught with challenges? Just as the young people are critical of the “silico-ed” nature of the food movement, approaches to youth engagement within public health must also be collaborative across disciplines, organizations, actors, and movements. Many youth-based organizations that are grounded in critical inquiry and youth organizing embody principles of shared power, shared conversation and relationship building. And many food justice organizations that engage young people are already providing hands-on learning and work opportunities. Building partnerships and alliances – between public health practitioners, youth-based or food-based organizations, and social movement organizations, might be one strategy for integrating experiential learning, critical reflection, and health. Collaborations between public health and other disciplines, such as anthropology, psychology, and urban education, which have a greater focus on narrative and identity, might also be fruitful.

Discussion

This chapter focused on the identities of the young activists—first, how do they describe themselves and the work they do? Second, how do they perform their narrative, and what does this tell us about their identity? And finally, what lessons do they have for practitioners about
how to better foster youth engagement and, as such, develop the identities of future food-justice activists?

Findings from this chapter reveal a shift away from the desire to feel like a “leader” (or the pressure to lead) and toward discourse around wanting to be “a part of something,” in particular something that is tangible and person-to-person. Further, many do not identify with activism in the form of rallies or protests. Instead, they see themselves as “navigators,” “practical activists,” or “educators.” This is not exclusive of the desire and commitment to work for long-lasting social change. We see this in their critical reflections on how we can more effectively engage future generations of food-justice leaders. They emphasized the importance of understanding and unpacking what it means to engage young people, doing so by being provocative and challenging; providing ample hands-on opportunities for learning; understanding power and shifting its dynamics; and using narratives and stories for learning, sharing, advocacy, and training.

While there is this shift away from self-identifying as a leader, the actions of the young activists demonstrate leadership and a commitment to social justice. This is evidenced by the way they talk about their work; the role of history, culture, and family; and their actions and work beyond their job. But there remains a spectrum of “activism” and the extent to which this belief in wanting change is deeply ingrained, flourishing or perhaps more peripheral. And with food justice, as Caleb states, “I think activism can take so many different forms, and I don’t think any one form is more important than another one.”
SECTION III: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS
CHAPTER 6

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

This final chapter begins with a brief summary of the study, its aims, and its methods. I then provide an overview of the conclusions of each of the chapters, a discussion of crosscutting themes, and a description of the study’s strengths and limitations. The chapter concludes with implications for future research, practice, and policy.

Review of the Study

This dissertation seeks to understand how and why young people become food activists and to learn from and elevate the voices of young food activists. Several factors guided the development of this study. First, the food-justice movement is a rapidly growing local, national, and global movement focused on efforts to advocate for healthy, local, affordable, safe, just, equitable, sustainable food and food systems. With the rise in obesity and other noncommunicable, diet-related health problems and the persistence of food insecurity among many vulnerable populations, youth organizing is a powerful approach to improving our food systems and, in turn, improving the population’s health.

Second, public-health researchers and practitioners are recognizing the importance of empowered youth participation as a crucial pathway toward building sustainable leadership for community-based health-promotion efforts and positive social change. Finally, while much is known about the outcomes of providing opportunities for young people to be actively and civicly engaged in their community, there is a paucity of research—in particular, qualitative and narrative research—on the trajectories of young people into social-justice and food-justice careers.
Based on 25 in-depth interviews with young people ages of 18 to 33 who are involved in food-activism projects in New York City, this study aims to understand the key factors contributing to young people’s involvement in food justice and the environmental and social contexts that shape their experiences, development, identity, and organizing strategies as emerging activists. As such, this study seeks to inform public-health advocates and practitioners about how we can learn from and work with future generations of leaders. The specific aims were as follows:

Aim 1: To describe factors and pathways that lead young people into food activism.

Aim 2: To examine the meaning of food justice and how young people participate in, reflect upon, and imagine the food-justice movement.

Aim 3: To analyze the identity of young food activists and what their narrative choices tell us about the identities they are presenting.

Aim 4: To describe methods and tools for engaging and empowering young people in food justice.

Overview of Findings

The overarching goal of this dissertation was to understand who these young food activists in New York City were and how and why they became activists. While my interviews revealed numerous findings and themes, this final discussion section focuses on what I believe to be the most salient points with regard to processes, participation, and identity and the themes that cut across each chapter.

Chapter 3 described how strong memories of food established the basis for and helped sustain an interest in food-related work. Equally important was family—less about their political leanings, but more about their values, support, and trust. Food is tangible and pervasive; it is
personal, emotional, social, political, and widespread. And it brings these young people closer to their culture and family by fostering community and intergenerational connections. Food is a central part of young food activists’ past, present, and imagined future. And it is the strong memories of and their cultural background in relation to food that has been embodied and transferred into their understanding of it and the systemic issues we face now.

With this early food voice established, the activists described critical moments and pathways that sparked their pursuit of food-justice work. This dissertation made clear that there are multiple trajectories to becoming an activist, and individual-, community-, and contextual-level factors influence this path. There was not just one “aha” moment for the young people. While most pointed to specific moments, it was the greater process overall that shaped their course. These motivations were grounded in exploration; hands-on learning and work experiences; a strong desire to do something meaningful; and an awareness and critical understanding of injustice, power, and privilege. These processes are critical for mediating the relationship between having an understanding of the world and societal challenges and taking action. They facilitated the shift from seeing food as a means of sustenance or nutrition to its being a platform for addressing deeper, systemic issues.

Chapter 4 examined the activists’ food voices, which were grounded in community building, rights, and justice. Developing and sustaining communities is crucially important to the young activists, particularly as a way to address what many believe to be a “crisis of the future.” Among this sample, the distinctions between food access, justice, and sovereignty were more fluid than the narrative of the broader movement. The activists also demonstrated elements of transformative food politics: They considered food for collective means and approached food justice through a holistic lens. For some, there was an understanding of the tensions between
local and global needs. In the telling of their stories, it was clear that the process of reflecting on their journey allowed a connection to be made between their early food memories and their current social-justice efforts. Food-justice work thus offers a vehicle or platform through which young people can express their commitment to food, social justice, equity, values and beliefs, and health. It is also essential to again highlight the linkages that young people make between food justice and other social justice issues, such as labor, immigration, health, and human rights. In fact, the realization of the intersections between the food justice movement and other social movements is key to influencing many of the activists’ trajectories.

Finally, in Chapter 5, I analyzed the embodied and presented identity of the young activists. In general, there was a shift away from the language of “activism,” with a greater emphasis on organizing, educating, and mentoring. There was a sense that “activism” as a term implies more individual-led and traditional forms of action; however, these young people said they feel a greater connection to a collective sense of action. This seems to be more relevant within the context of the food-justice movement and the inherent sharing and collective nature of food. Furthermore, there were differences in the narrative performances, whereby some were more “professionally” told, more linear, and less tense and political. Others presented a narrative in which the personal, political, and professional were more inextricably tied.

This dissertation illustrates various trajectories toward activism, but it is important to note that they unfold in a time- and place-specific context. These findings are based on a sample of millennials living and working in New York City during a time when the food movement is flourishing. Thus, it is difficult to know whether these trends are specific to young adults who are at the beginning or middle of their career, to young people in New York City, or indeed to young food activists. This aside, everyone I spoke with was deeply committed to his or her work. I
walked away inspired and humbled by every story and with much respect for the work they are doing to bring forth social change.

**Crosscutting Themes**

This section describes some of the key findings that permeate the entirety of the dissertation. I analyzed, separately, pathways toward social-justice careers, engagement within the food movement, and the identity of young food activists. The food movement is not currently considered a youth movement, but there are clearly many young people engaged. If this generation is the new face of food-justice work, it is imperative that we take seriously their participation, perceptions, and strategies. So, in this final section, I’ve framed the crosscutting themes to address what the broader findings tell us about what it is like to be a young food activist in New York City, with an eye toward understanding the points of intervention for public-health researchers and practitioners. There are three main themes: what work means to young people, what community means, and the tensions between “doing” activist work versus “being” an activist. These findings are significant for public-health researchers and practitioners, as they inform how we shape work and volunteer opportunities, foster a sense of community, and acknowledge the different relationships to social justice and activism.

*The importance of (social justice) work*

As previously noted, the primary interest of this study is food-justice work. I asked, what are the factors and processes that lead young people to pursue work in the field? The notion and significance of work was indeed a central theme, as it pertains to one’s trajectory and identity, as well as to processes and outcomes. In Chapter 3 we saw the importance of exposure to work and educational opportunities, particularly those that are meaningful, hands-on, and applied. These opportunities led the young activists to consider historical social movements, leadership, and
critical-thinking skills. For some, they also provided a safe space for the young people to reflect on and develop an awareness of power, politics, and injustices within the food system. While the pathways are diverse, meaningful hands-on learning and work experiences provide the necessary opportunities for putting theory into action.

Work, mainly social justice–grounded work, is an important part of shaping young people’s paths into social-justice careers. First, it is a reflection of their personal identity. Their work becomes synonymous with their values, their ethics, and their passion. It also becomes an extension of their instilled family values, their culture, and their past—and for this group, food brings this all together. Of course, the process of choosing and committing to a goal is part and parcel for the pathway from adolescence to early adulthood and the establishment of their identity.167,168,178

Work is also deeply embedded in their identity as activists. Chapter 5 showed that, for most, activism is work, not a job. It is intentional, proactive, and a source of pride. And the choice of work is based on a very thoughtful and reflective process. This is in part because their motivations were intrinsic—their pursuit of work that is “right” and “conscious” mattered much more to them than any financial, or other extrinsic, benefits. Contextually, they were supported by their family to pursue a career in an environment that is ripe with social-justice opportunities.

In examining this outcome further, I would like to revisit the typology of activism described in the literature review, which distinguished between: 1) traditional community service activities and the provision of aid to individuals; 2) civic engagement, which involves work in local, state, and national organizations and political work; and 3) sociopolitical activism, that is, social-justice and community-organizing efforts.31 A parallel typology comes from Westheimer and Kahne, who investigated school-based programs that taught democratic citizenship, finding
three forms: the “personally responsible citizen,” who acts responsibly in their community and is characterized by an individualistic approach to citizenship; the “participatory citizen,” who is actively involved in community organizations and takes a more leadership role within systems and structures; and the “justice-oriented citizen,” who challenges and assesses social, political, and economic structures to address root causes of problems. Much of the work that initially sparked an interest in food justice would fall into the first type of activism or citizenship. But the vast majority of young activists are currently engaged at a civic or sociopolitical level. Likewise, the activists I spoke with certainly moved from the “personally responsible citizen” to either “participatory” or “justice-oriented” as they began relating to food beyond an individual level.

This spectrum mirrors the current debate around food justice, in which some work is devoid of politics and conflates “local” and “community” with “inclusive” and “good.” Others are more explicit about justice and how they seek to effect systems-level change. The question arises, then, as to how this shift from service to social justice, or individual to community, occurs. Evaluations of youth-development programs often point to acquired skills (such as critical thinking, public speaking, and having a sense of responsibility) as leading to youth participation and engagement. But these activists spoke less about specific skills and more holistically about their experiences. They were reflective and emotional in their storytelling, even those whose narrative was more professional and linear.

McLean argues that the construction of a narrative allows for the exploration of identity and that those who link specific past experiences to current commitments may have stronger, longer-lasting, consistent commitments. Everyone I spoke with revealed strong food memories and pointed to several turning points. But, more important, they all engaged in frequent conversations with friends, families, and colleagues about the work they do. They said they talk
and think about all facets of food on a daily basis. The main reasons these young activists chose their work is that they saw how food affects everyone and because “everyone needs to eat.” They also saw it as a vehicle for examining other social-justice issues concerning labor, gender, the environment, and immigration. That they interact with food on a personal, professional, and political basis daily made the issue unique and appealing. Engagement with social justice-grounded work and learning opportunities, in addition to social networks, family values, and self-reflection, are thus critical for cultivating an activist consciousness.

*The multiple meanings of community*

The importance of exposure to work opportunities is closely tied to the meaning of community, another theme that cut across each of the chapters. With the field of community-based participatory research, the first step, and often the major challenge, is to define the community. Communities of identity may be based on geographic boundaries, ethnicity, history, and so forth. While MacQueen et al. showed that people tend to share a core definition of community, “the experience of community differs from one setting to another.”\textsuperscript{180} It is therefore important to come up with a consistent definition while taking into consideration the context of the community. Once this is established, building strengths and resources within this community will most likely be more effective.\textsuperscript{65} If we are to consider young people as true collaborators and experts on the social and economic contexts of their neighborhood or the communities where they work, in order to build their leadership and work together toward health equity, we have to understand what community means to them.\textsuperscript{64,65}

While an explicit question about community was not asked, findings from this study reveal multiple levels and strands of community. First, the participants’ food memories were very much grounded in the notion of community, whereby the act of sharing food and spending
time together around the table was crucial to their becoming involved in food justice. In this regard, community is simply family and friends. But another strand becomes integral when describing their pursuit of work. The activists all spoke to some degree about how through work opportunities, they “found” their “community.” This refers either to people who inspire them or people they feel connected to. It points to communities of shared values, beliefs, and interests, as well as the importance of representation and inclusivity for the youth, people of color, and women.

The young adults I spoke with also framed their definitions of food justice and food activism within narratives of community. The rights-based language they used illustrates a focus on the collective, not the individual. For them, food justice is a way to find and bring people together (thus building on their personal and family-level ideas of community). This focus on collective responsibility is further evidenced by the intersectional communities that were so instrumental to the foundation of their activist pathways. That the solidarity between the food justice community and other social justice communities (e.g., labor, immigration, LGBTQ) is tangible and significant for these young people, demonstrates an understanding of the multiple layers, connections, and dimensions of inequality. And food activism is less about “leading” and more about collaborating and collective action. This perspective resonates with the Black Lives Matter movement, which has been called “leader-full.” As Patrisse Cullors said in an interview with National Public Radio (NPR):

It’s important to us in the Black Lives Matter movement that…we’re not following an individual, right? This is a leader-full movement. I don’t believe you can do anything without leadership. I don’t believe that at all. I think there are many people leading this conversation, advancing this conversation…. There [are] groups on the ground that have been doing this work, and I think we stand on the shoulders of those folks.
These young people are embracing the “language of community” set forth by Wallack and Lawrence by embodying a sense of shared values, responsibility, and interconnectedness. And it is through collective action and a sense of shared and community-level responsibility that they feel they can address the threats they see to their environment, food systems, and culture.

“Doing” activist work vs. “being” an activist

The final intersectional theme is about the tensions between “doing” the work and “being” an activist. As we saw, there were distinctions made between protesting and “doing” substantive work, whereby the latter refers to the idea of “practical” activism and the desire to forge connections and work collectively for social change. In general, greater importance was placed on commitment and effort as opposed to taking on the labels “activist” and “organizer.” Other researchers have similarly found that youth organizers today are seeking to participate in actions that “promote sustained engagement and offer infrastructure and intergenerational support rather than the more spontaneous, less tightly knit approaches” such as the Occupy movement. This “practicality” of activism also reflects the hands-on, community-based nature of food and food justice.

Caleb’s statement that “activism can take so many different forms, and I don’t think any one form is more important than another one” certainly rings true for this group. The interactions between personal experience, work, and politics differed. There was the “practical activist,” whose work was social justice–oriented, but their narratives were less politically motivated. For this group, food justice provides an area for which they can pursue a career that matches their values and interests. There were also those whose work was less politicized (e.g. farmer’s markets), but because they have personally experienced injustice, they have a more systemic, political view of food and food justice. And finally there were those whose activism was very
much central to their personal and professional identity. We saw this in the narrative analysis and the way some stories were woven between personal, political, and professional experiences, whereas others presented a more linear, professional narrative.

These different channels and types of activism don’t seem to undercut the actual spirit of activism. But perhaps it could be asked, if someone takes part in activism but from a depoliticized perspective, is the potential for impact limited? Is it more important that we assess commitment as a function of impact? This, of course, is beyond the scope of this dissertation, but certainly an important question to understand.

It is clear that young people are active in different ways now. However, they converge around the desire to work toward social change together and promote cohesion over individuality. They are demonstrating an understanding of transformative food politics. And most are openly addressing the role of race, racism, and structural inequalities, which, many would agree, is indeed crucial for social change. With new forms of engagement and participation with regard to social movements and activism, we need to find ways to tailor support for activists and those doing activist work.

**Strengths and Limitations**

**Strengths**

This study has several strengths. One is that this is the only study that examines the trajectories and pathways of young people into food activism. Thus, the results of this study contribute to public-health literature on youth engagement in food-justice work as well as to broader social movement and positive youth development literature. Another is that there is a paucity of narrative research within public health, apart from illness narratives. This study brought to the fore the stories and voices of food activists, and in particular, young food activists, which have been missing from public-health literature and the broader discourse of the food
movement. While the extensive, in-depth life story data collected limited the sample size, the information gathered provided insight into and acknowledgement of the identity and experiences of these young food activists in a way that population-based methods do not. Through this approach, I was able to examine the significant role of meaningful work opportunities in shaping young people’s identity and development, and the way the use of narrative reveals moments of self-reflection.

The choice to focus on New York City is a third strength. As the largest city in the United States, a city with numerous community-based organizations that engage diverse young people, New York City provided the possibility for purposive sampling across several characteristics. Developing an understanding across these characteristics is critical given the prevalence of health inequalities in New York City and the potential for mobilizing young people to address these public-health issues. Further, the wide range of experiences and food justice activities taking place in New York City, offers potential for developing concepts and hypotheses around youth food activism that can be tested in other settings. On the other hand, New York City is unique and the findings may not be applicable to other cities. But the goal of this research was not to generalize findings for all cities or settings, but rather to expand our understanding of youth activism within the social, environmental, and political conditions of the region focused upon. In fact, generalization negates the purpose of qualitative research, which is to understand meanings versus “facts” or generalizable knowledge.136

Limitations

There are several limitations to this study that require mention. Methodologically, these interviews provided retrospective understanding and were shaped by who the interviewees were at that specific point in time. We do not know what stories would have been told, or what their
food voices might have been, if the interviews had been done on a different day, in a different place, or with a different interviewer. This speaks to the “methodological riddle of distinguishing between a life that is lived and a life that is told.”\textsuperscript{121} While a level of saturation was reached with respect to the specific research questions of this dissertation, without follow-up interviews, we will not know where these young activists will end up. Will they continue working in food justice, switch to other social-justice movements, or leave activism altogether? As Holland and Thomson state, with regard to longitudinal interviews, “With the accumulation of accounts we capture contradiction, dissonance, and repetition. Silences are more discernable, and consequences and antecedents begin to be revealed.”\textsuperscript{131} So by following these young activists over time, we can begin to shed more light on the “life as lived.”

Regarding the sample, the group of young adults I interviewed can be considered highly motivated and educated. They are all working in food justice full-time. Many have graduate degrees or are in pursuit of college or graduate degrees. This presents another limitation regarding generalizability, as we cannot speak about the trajectories of people who are food activists on a more voluntary basis or who are less educated. Every qualitative sampling strategy has strengths and weaknesses, and employing a different technique may have yielded a different sample, however, the sample here does include a diverse cross-section of young people who have a variety of experiences with different types of organizations across the city.

Finally, it is difficult to ascertain whether the characteristics of these activists were shaped more by age and stage of development; the progressive, urban environment they currently work in; or the time and era in which they grew up. Of course, we know that political activism is embedded in psychological, social, and political contexts.\textsuperscript{66} As such, these factors are very much inextricably linked and likely impossible to separate.
Implications for Research

The findings suggest multiple directions—both theoretical and methodological—for additional research. From a methodological perspective, as this research was a “snapshot” in time, a longitudinal, qualitative examination of activist trajectories is warranted. In this way, we can look more closely at motivating factors at key moments of transition and see where young people “end up.” A longitudinal study can also help elucidate the connection between working in food justice and health outcomes. Given that all participants talked at length about their food behaviors—cooking, eating fresh foods (when they can afford them), the importance of sharing meals—does this also mean they will have better health outcomes?

Much of the research on civic engagement is based on quantitative surveys, which have their own set of strengths and challenges. A mixed-methods approach to engagement in and trajectories toward activism, using interviews and surveys, would allow for deeper insight into these processes. The combination of qualitative data with measurements of agency and efficacy and knowledge of history would be a powerful contribution to the field.

Another novel approach to understanding youth activism would be through collective storytelling. Given the importance of collective identity and decision making as it pertains to social movements, collective storytelling can contribute to understanding dynamics as well as foster and increase political efficacy and critical reflection. This would entail, for example, bringing food activists together to share their stories with one another to see how individual and group identities are negotiated.

Yet another methodological recommendation is the need for comparative studies. For example, a key question that is unanswerable in this dissertation is whether all young people have these particular connections to and memories of food or whether they are specific to people
who become food activists. Thus, future research might entail studies that compare the experiences and trajectories of the following: food activists to nonactivists; the intersectional solidarities across different types of activism (e.g., food, reproductive, immigrant, labor, and environmental rights); those who work in food justice full-time and those who volunteer; and food activism in urban and rural settings.

Another lens for examining youth food activism is on an organizational level, and the type of engagement and where organizations or settings fall along the spectrum of youth participation. That is, how does the meaning of youth food activism differ between educational and service-learning organizations, youth-driven but adult-led organizations, and youth-led organizations? Further research on the organizational characteristics and patterns of interaction with young people that support paths into activism are needed. Related to this is whether there are any negative outcomes of youth participation, which has not been well documented.

With respect to theory, greater research is needed to understand the role and recognition of privilege. Other scholars also have found the need to understand how to “develop circuits of political solidarity between privileged and marginalized groups,” as those with privilege are indeed capable of embodying collective responsibility and taking social action.\textsuperscript{184} Related to this, as suggested by Valocchi, is a better understanding of the intersection between social class and activists’ identity.\textsuperscript{166}

Findings from this dissertation also help further shape the frameworks and theories that guided this study. The framework by Watts and Flanagan emphasizes social structures and inequities, and the importance of opportunity structures and social analysis.\textsuperscript{31} The results of this study support this framework, but findings would also suggest a need to look at broader processes, and the influence of critical moments, that promote civic engagement and
participation. A more careful and in-depth application of the lens of critical bifocality, and the situation of narratives within history and structure, would also be particularly useful.\textsuperscript{146} Furthermore, while the model acknowledges the role of identity vis-à-vis agency and efficacy, this study revealed the different ways activism, as a terminology and an identity, is defined and interpreted. Future research might build on this to create theories and frameworks that can better guide the practice of youth activism.

Lastly, additional research is needed to understand what the notion of a food-justice community means to young people with respect to social media. That is, how are online and offline communities navigated and interpreted? What is the impact of social media on personal and cultural connections to food and the progress of the food-justice movement? And building on earlier findings about “authenticity,” how is this social construct understood, or performed, with respect to online and offline activism?\textsuperscript{185,186}

\textbf{Implications for Practice and Policy}

The primary recommendations for practice and policy revolve around how we might shape youth experiences, education, and policies to consciously incorporate social justice and food justice principles. Anim Steel said, “a new, youth-led, multiracial coalition could unleash the voice and energy of those with the most to gain from transforming the food system—young people.”\textsuperscript{84} With this in mind, what can organizations that serve young people do to better engage youth, and help build this next generation of food justice leaders?

First, public health practitioners and policymakers need to ensure that paid, hands-on work opportunities are widely available. Equally important is to consider the nature of the opportunity. As we saw with the variety of critical moments, young people need the time and chance to explore, reflect on where they’re coming from and the experiences they’ve had, but
also build skills and create space for critical- and self-reflection. Ginwright, for example, calls for a greater process of caring and healing within youth organizing and development, which involves building the capacity of young people to understand systemic social issues, discover opportunities for change, and act to improve their communities. This notion of care and emotions moves beyond trust and forming bonds, and refers more to collective and individual responsibility. He said:

For young people, healing fosters a collective optimism and a transformation of spirit that over time, contributes to healthy vibrant community life….By integrating issues of power, history, self-identity and the possibility of collective agency and struggle, radical healing rebuilds communities that foster hope and political possibilities for young people.

One way for public health practitioners to do this is to listen to young people’s stories and engage through conversation, cooking, and eating, such as through the methodology of charlas culinarias. In this way, we can better understand their relationship with food, what food means to them and their family, what food was like growing up, of people who are important in their lives – and to find common ground. As findings from this dissertation showed, the connection between memories, history, and current work are a critical process of becoming engaged in one’s community.

Another way is to engage with young people about racism and oppression, and to equip students with the language to do so. Findings from this study illustrate the importance of developing an analysis and understanding of race, racism, privilege, and health, particularly as they operate within the food system. Dr. Mary Bassett, commissioner of the New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene, spoke about Black Lives Matter and what people can do to support the movement. She emphasized the “moral and professional obligation to encourage critical dialogue and action on issues of racism and health.” Many food justice organizations are already focused on structural oppression within food systems, but there needs
to be greater dialogue and action around public health, health and structural inequalities, and food justice. Public health practitioners can partner with these food and youth-centered organizations that embed trainings on organizing, mobilizing, and history of other social movements, within their programming, for instance.

On a policy level, as we heard from the young activists, greater representation and visibility of women, youth, and youth of color is of utmost importance. Policymakers can address this by ensuring food policy councils and other governmental bodies working on food issues proactively work with and engage these missing voices. Toronto, for example, has a Youth Food Policy Council which aims to democratize the food system by engaging young people and offers education and leadership training. And the Detroit Black Community Food Security Network (DBCFSN) specifically works to address structural racism and economic justice in all arenas of the food system, including food access, retail ownership, jobs, and food production. However, many other food policy councils struggle with ensuring representation from young people or underserved communities.92

Conclusion

Irena said, when asked how we mobilize and better support young people, “We have to realize that youth are necessary to the movement.” She raised the need to challenge the misconceptions that young people are apathetic and disengaged. Indeed, this dissertation highlights the importance of listening to and understanding the stories, culture, and biographies of young people, because they are in fact reflective, critical, and impassioned. Young people are key to many social movements, they are innovative in their practices and strategies, and they know best how to connect to and mobilize other young people.189 And as we are witnessing,
youth organizing around food justice is demonstrating to be a powerful approach to improving
our food systems and, in turn, improving population health.

A recent article from *The Washington Post* examined research on civil resistance and
how a movement (in the article’s case, the Women’s March on Washington) can be successful. They call for support from “different corners of society,” including groups working on diverse
issues, cross generation, and “crosscutting mainstream appeal to the moderate and the wealthy,”
a “common elevating goal,” and a motivation for action, such as the fear that your rights and
opportunities are being threatened. This very much speaks to the potential of the food movement,
and the spirit of the young people working within this movement.

This in-depth interview study of young food activists in New York City elevates and
makes visible the powerful voices, intimate stories, and diverse but united pathways of young
people working to transform their food systems. It is not surprising that a movement as diverse
as food justice would bring in young activists whose work spans the spectrum, from more
localized work, to work that targets institutions, systems, and policies. This dissertation
highlighted the differences in their narratives and pathways, their identity as activists, and the
importance of family, values, ethics, work, and critical reflection in shaping their trajectories. As
such, this study provides insights into how public health practitioners, advocates, and
researchers, can collaborate with young people and design opportunity structures that support
young people and their fight for a more just food system.
Dear colleagues, friends, and fellow advocates,

My name is Amy Kwan and I am a doctoral candidate at the City University of New York (CUNY) Graduate Center and School of Public Health, and I am conducting research on youth food activism in New York City. My interest in youth food activism stems from nearly a decade of working for community-based and youth-centered projects that have sought to not just improve the health of young people, but to create space for their leadership and vision for social change.

For my dissertation, I’m exploring the experiences of NYC young food activists (ages 18-30) and their pathways into this work. Specifically, I am doing research to understand how community and youth engagement, technology, and social media support health interventions and social change.

To this end, I’m looking for 20-30 young people to interview who are currently engaged in food justice work in New York City, and have been involved in this work for at least one year.

Are you a young NYC food activist, or do you know of someone who is? Please contact me if you are interested in sharing your story; if you know someone who might be interested, please send them this letter with my contact information.

I can be reached at: akwan@gc.cuny.edu or they can call or text me at: 917.597.9096.

With gratitude,
Amy

--
Amy Kwan, MPH
Doctoral Candidate, Public Health
The Graduate Center & CUNY School of Public Health
akwan@gc.cuny.edu
APPENDIX B
INTERVIEW GUIDE

CASE ID#: _______________

Background

1. Let’s start with you telling me a little about yourself.
   a. Tell me what a typical day like is for you? What’s the first thing you do when you get up in the morning and what happens after that?

Current Involvement in Food Justice Movement

2. What types of food justice-related activities are you currently involved in?
   a. Are you part of any networks/groups/organizations?
   b. Can you talk about the types strategies these organizations use for engaging and supporting young people in (food) activism? (e.g., leadership skills, organizing, knowledge, etc.)

3. What types of change are you working towards?
   a. What strategies do you (as an individual) use to try to achieve this change?
   b. Are there any related frustrations or barriers you would like to share?

4. What about social media? How does social media fit into your personal and activist life?
   a. Do you have a website/blog? Facebook? Twitter?

5. So now, I’d like to ask you to define food justice – and food activism
   a. What does the food justice movement mean to you?
   b. What aspects of the movement do you most connect with?
   c. What about yourself? How do you identify with this food justice work you do?
      i. [Probe: language re: activist, change agent, etc.]

Pathways into Food Activism

6. Tell me a little about your background – where are you from?
   i. School? Family? Work?

7. Can you tell me the story of how you got involved in this work?
   a. How long have you been involved in this type of work?
   b. What other organizations have you worked with?

8. If you think back to when you first really thought of yourself as an activist, to now, how has that definition, or identification, or involvement, changed?
9. Was there a particular person, organization or event that played an important role in your getting involved in food justice?

10. Who do you talk to about this work?

**Why Food**

11. Have you been involved in other types of social justice or activism/advocacy work?

12. How do you think about the connections between your work around food and these other kinds of activism?

13. What about food is compelling to you?
   a. What is your relationship to food – how does food fit into your life?
   b. What did food mean to your family?

14. Why do you think some young people choose to participate in food justice?

15. Why is it important that we think about food and food justice?

16. Based on your experiences as a food activist, what advice would you give to those who want to encourage more young people to become engaged in food justice?
   a. What do you think needs to happen to get more people (and in particular young people) involved?
   b. What do you think youth, community, and food organizations can do to engage more people like yourself in food justice/activism?

17. In five years, what will be your most vivid memory of your work with X organization?

18. Is there anything else you’d like to share about your experiences as a food activist?
APPENDIX C

INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Department of Public Health

CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN A RESEARCH PROJECT

Project Title: The Role of Youth Activism in the Food Justice Movement

Principal Investigator: Amy Kwan  
Graduate Student, Doctoral Candidate  
CUNY Graduate Center  
365 5th Avenue, New York, NY 10016  
917.597.9066

Faculty Advisor: Nicholas Freudenberg  
Distinguished Professor of Public Health  
Executive Officer, CUNY Doctor of Public Health Program  
City University of New York School of Public Health at Hunter College  
2180 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10035  
212.396.7738

Site where study is to be conducted: CUNY Graduate Center

Introduction/Purpose: You are invited to participate in a research study. The study is conducted under the direction of Amy Kwan, Doctoral Candidate, CUNY Graduate Center. The purpose of this research study is to understand the experiences of young food activists, and the roles and strategies of organizations and settings in engaging young people in food activism. The results of this study may help inform how young people get into food activism, the sources of their agency, and how public health advocates and researchers can better collaborate with, and design opportunity structures to more effectively foster youth activism.

Procedures: Approximately 30 individuals are expected to participate in this study. Each individual will participate in one interview and one brief survey. The time commitment of each participant is expected to be about 1-2 hours. Each session will take place at a location convenient for you. I would also like to be able to follow any social media (e.g., websites, blogs, Twitter feeds, Facebook posts) that are relevant to your food justice work.

Is it ok for me to follow this information? ☐ Yes ☐ No

Possible Discomforts and Risks: Your participation in this study may involve some discomfort with the questions asked. To minimize these risks your questionnaire and interview will be identified by a code, instead of your name. Furthermore, you can choose to stop your participation in the study at any time, without any consequences.

Benefits: There are no direct benefits; however, participating in the study may increase knowledge about how public health professionals can better collaborate with young people in health-based social movements.
Voluntary Participation: Your participation in this study is voluntary, and you may decide not to participate without prejudice, penalty, or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. If you decide to leave the study, please contact the principal investigator, Amy Kwan, to inform them of your decision.

Financial Considerations: Participation in this study will involve no cost. For your participation in this study you will receive a $25 gift card after the interview.

Confidentiality: The data obtained from you will be collected via audio and written document. The collected data will be accessible to only the Principal Investigator. The researcher will protect your confidentiality by coding the data and securely storing the data. The collected data will be stored on a password-protected computer. No personal identifying information will be connected with the data, as consent forms will be kept separate from the data. Audio recordings of interviews will be used to accurately capture all of the data collected during interviews. No personal identifying information will be on the audio files. The data, including the audio recordings, will be stored for a minimum of three years.

Is it ok for me to record during the study? ☐ Yes ☐ No

Contact Questions/Persons: If you have any questions about the research now or in the future, you should contact the Principal Investigator, Amy Kwan at 917.597.9096 or akwan@gc.cuny.edu. If you have any questions concerning your rights as a participant in this study, you may contact Sarah Leon, Hunter College Human Research Protection Program (HRPP) Coordinator, at bleon@hunter.cuny.edu.

Statement of Consent:
“I have read the above description of this research and I understand it. I have been informed of the risks and benefits involved, and all my questions have been answered to my satisfaction. Furthermore, I have been assured that any future questions that I may have will also be answered by the principal investigator of the research study. I voluntarily agree to participate in this study.

By signing this form I have not waived any of my legal rights to which I would otherwise be entitled.

I will be given a copy of this statement.”

Printed Name of Subject __________________________ Signature of Subject __________________________ Date Signed ________________

Printed Name of Person Explaining Consent Form __________________________ Signature of Person Explaining Consent Form __________________________ Date Signed ________________

Printed Name of Investigator __________________________ Signature of Investigator __________________________ Date Signed ________________
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