Identifying Emergent Social Networks at a Federally Qualified Health Center-Based Farmers’ Market

Farmers’ markets are becoming more popular as an environmental intervention which can promote access to healthy, affordable foods & change behavior to healthier eating practices.

Social network theory may be helpful to explore how farmers’ markets promote social relationships & thus may produce changes in behavior (i.e., space to develop social networks, promote health).

Little research exists about the interactions taking place at markets in rural or low-income communities; more research is needed, especially in rural communities with limited access to healthy foods and where health disparities may be more prevalent.

(Alia, Freedman, Brandt, & Browne, 2013)
The purpose of this study was to build on past research by providing a rich description of social networks (i.e., linkages of people & forms of interaction) that are naturally occurring within a farmers’ market located at a federally qualified health center (FQHC) in a rural, low-income community.

Findings could be used to enhance the effectiveness of farmers’ markets as environmental interventions for health outcomes & enhance understanding of facilitators & barriers of food access as well as broader community outcomes.

(Alia, Freedman, Brandt, & Browne, 2013)
Methods

Context:
- The study took place at a federally qualified health center (FQHC) in a rural county in South Carolina that is predominantly African American, with 23% of the population living below the poverty level, and a very poor overall health status in the county.

Intervention:
- The Right Choice, Fresh Start (RCFS) Farmers’ Market
  - multi-vendor, produce-only farmers’ market
  - operated in the FQHC parking lot on 1 day per week for 5 months per year since 2011
  - accept Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP); Women, Infants, & Children Program (WIC) Senior WIC Farmers’ Market Nutrition Program (FMNP) vouchers, etc.
  - The focus of this analysis is on the market’s first year

(Alia, Freedman, Brandt, & Browne, 2013)
Methods & Procedures:

- Open, ethnographic observational approach to explore the range & depth of social network interactions occurring within the farmers’ market setting.

- 22 research assistants served as participants embedded within the setting.

- Recorded observations about naturally occurring interactions around food access, economic, and community-related outcomes (e.g., between consumers, between farmers, & between farmers & consumers).

- Data recorded on a modified version of a systematic observational tool (Baber & Frongillo, 2003) to record social interactions as well as demographics of market attendees and their shopping patterns.

(Alia, Freedman, Brandt, & Browne, 2013)
Findings

Actors & Non-human facilitators to social connections at the farmers’ market:

- **Human actors**
  - farmers
  - customers
  - research/market staff

- **Non-human facilitators**
  - specified food (i.e., farmer boiling peanuts created social interactions with consumers and farmers chatting)
  - forms of payment
  - weather

(Alia, Freedman, Brandt, & Browne, 2013)
Findings- Forms of Social Interaction at the Market

- **Communication/Relationship Development** (i.e., market being a pleasant atmosphere, like a small village)
- **Economic & Financial Exchange** (i.e., making deals for discounted prices, bartering produce)
- **Educational Exchanges** (i.e., gardening, farming, cooking produce)
- **Resource Sharing** (i.e., goods, info, services)
- **Community Ownership** (i.e., inviting others to come to market, offering feedback on how to better advertise the market)
- **Conflict Resolution** (i.e., issues with payment, produce quality, market policies)

(Alia, Freedman, Brandt, & Browne, 2013)
Implications for Practice

• Farmers’ markets as an environmental intervention can offer a social climate to develop or enhance various social networks related to fellowship, education, financial opportunity, and community ownership.

• Social interactions found at farmers’ markets provide opportunities for social networks to develop among farmers’ market attendees.

• Such social interactions can help facilitate the acquisition of resources related to health, economic & community outcomes.

(Alia, Freedman, Brandt, & Browne, 2013)
References
