

Triple-rigorous storytelling: A PI's reflections on devising case study methods with five community-based food justice organizations

FoodDignity

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Abstract

Case study research provides scholarly paths for storytelling, with systematic methodological guides for achieving epistemological rigor in telling true stories and deriving lessons from them. For documenting and better understanding work as complex as community organizing for food justice, rigorous storytelling may proffer one of the most suitable research methods. In a five-year action-research project called Food Dignity, leaders of five food justice community-based organizations (CBOs) and academics at four universities collaborated to develop case studies about the work of the five CBOs. In this reflective essay, the project's principal investigator reviews methods used in other food justice case studies and outlines the case study methods used in Food Dignity. She also

recounts lessons learned while developing these methods with collaborators. The community co-investigators show her that telling true stories with morals relating to justice work requires three kinds of methodological rigor: ethical, emotional, and epistemological.

Want a different ethic? Tell a different story.

– Thomas King, *The Truth About Stories* (2005)

Keywords

Case Studies; Food Dignity; Research Methods

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Introduction

Some of the social theories and research methods I studied as a Ph.D. student seemed so intuitively obvious that academics claiming them, and often disguising them with unintuitive monikers, annoyed me. I would joke that I was using “the walking method of pedestrian theory.” I would employ that simple phrase for complex reasons. I felt it mocked academic exclusion via discursive obfuscation or co-optation of common wisdom (such as knowing how to walk). Yet I hoped it still honored the nearly infinite complexity of understanding and changing human society (which is at least as complex as understanding how those with able bodies walk, and how that ability can sometimes be recovered when it is lost). It is this scale of complexity that social science research aims to help understand and improve, including tackling the most wicked of social problems. For example, how do, can, and should U.S. communities build community-led food systems that generate sustainable food security for all? These are the questions we¹ posed in a community-university action, research, and education project that we called *Food Dignity*, for which I served as the project director and principal investigator (PI).

The opening paragraphs of our project application to USDA National Institute of Food and Agriculture (USDA NIFA) invoked the journeys taken by the five community-based organizations (CBOs) who had agreed to partner in Food Dignity. It also outlined the journey we proposed to take together over the next five years:

Community and social movements for food justice and sustainability suggest paths to an alternative, much brighter future, and they are making these paths by walking. In this integrated research, extension, and education project, we propose to trace the paths taken by five US communities and to collaborate in mapping and traveling the most appropriate and effective roads forward for creating sustainable community food systems (SCFS) for food security (FS).

Our project title, “Food Dignity,” signals both our ethical stance that human and community agency in food systems is an end in itself and our scientific hypothesis that building civic and institutional capacity to engage in SCFS for FS action will improve the sustainability and equity of our local food systems and economies. (Porter, Food Dignity proposal narrative, 2010)

Starting in April 2011, we were awarded US\$5 million for five years (which we extended to seven) to complete our proposed work. Using case study methods with the five CBOs was our primary approach to answering our triad of do, can, and should questions mentioned above.

In this essay, I share and reflect on my journey of developing and implementing these case methods with the Food Dignity team. This is partly a traditional methods paper, which summarizes our data gathering and analysis approaches. I embed that within an autoethnographic meta-methods paper, addressing the process of devising these methods while striving to meet ethical, epistemological, and emotional standards of rigor in our case study research. This “triple-e” rigor is what I mean by *rigorous storytelling*. Mentors, friends, students, and partners in Food Dignity generously tried to teach me how to do it and to do it with me. Here, I trace my journey of learning to try to collaboratively tell true and important stories about community-led work for food justice.

Case Study Research Methods

As an academic trained in western forms of science, I think of research as using systematic methods to generate new knowledge or understanding. According to indigenous research methods scholar Shawn Wilson, “Research is a ceremony... The purpose of any ceremony is to build stronger relationships or bridge the distance between our cosmos and us” (Wilson, 2008, p. 137). I have strived to bridge the distance between these research paradigms via rigorous, participatory, and ethically driven storytelling methods.

Dignity collaboration.

¹ I use “our” and “we” in this paper to denote the dozens of community- and university-based co-investigators in the Food

Postmodern philosopher Lyotard (1979/1984) calls narrative “the quintessential form of customary knowledge” (p. 19), an idea which contrasts with western notions of scientific knowledge. However, by using systematic methods to document and develop true stories, researchers claim the scientific research mantle for case study narratives.

That said, as one scholar laments, “Regretfully, the term ‘case study’ is a definitional morass.” He offers the following definition of ‘case study’: “an intensive study of a single unit for the purpose of understanding a larger class of (similar) units” (Gerring, 2004, p. 341-342). One aspect that he and three oft-cited case study methodologists (Merriam, 1998; Stake, 1995; Yin, 2009) agree on is that case studies are “bounded.” For example, in Food Dignity, our primary case studies are bounded by the work of the five food justice CBOs.

As part of my dissertation work at Cornell University, I developed case studies with three community-based childhood obesity prevention projects in the U.S. northeast (Porter, 2013). I employed common sense, I thought, my “walking method of pedestrian theory,” in immersing myself in each case using multiple approaches. I was inspired by social science method guides (Flyvbjerg, 2001; Maxwell, 2005), worked under broader philosophical influences (including Foucault, 1972/1980, 1981; Habermas, 1981/1984; Lyotard, 1979/1984; McDonald, 2004; Sandoval, 2000; L. T. Smith, 1999), and consulted academic guides on several forms of qualitative data gathering and analysis. However, when it came time to write the case study chapter of my dissertation, this all seemed unconvincing to cite as a case study method since none of these were specifically case method references. In a semipanic, I read Stake’s *The Art of Case Study Research* (1995), Merriam’s 1998 guide, and Yin’s 4th edition of *Case Study Research: Design and Methods* (2009). In a technical sense, Yin’s guide closely mirrored the approach I had been taking. I claimed, almost entirely post-hoc, that I had employed his case study methods.

Though his approach has been critiqued for being too reductive and positivist (Bartlett & Vavrus, 2017; Yazan, 2015), Yin provides a highly practical and granular guide to case methods. He

defines and describes case studies as follows:

1. A case study is an empirical inquiry that
 - investigates a contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real-life context, especially when
 - the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident.
2. The case study inquiry
 - copes with the technically distinctive situation in which there will be many more variables of interest than data points, and as one result
 - relies on multiple sources of evidence, with data needing to converge in a triangulating fashion, and as another result
 - benefits from the prior development of theoretical propositions to guide data collection and analysis (Yin, 2009, p. 18).

Yin also outlines why case study methods are well suited to answering “how” and “why” questions and for understanding complex and current events (Yin, 2009, pp. 8–9). He suggests that these methods offer the most promising research approach when investigator “control of behavioral events” is not possible and when the “goal will be to expand and generalize theories (analytic generalization) and not to enumerate frequencies (statistical generalization)” (Yin, 2009, p. 15).

These parameters and Yin’s definition apply to community-based food system and food justice work. Therefore, like many other researchers doing work about community food system and food justice projects, activities, and organizations, I proposed to use case study methods in Food Dignity. Continuing the mostly traditional methods part of this paper, next I review previous relevant case study research and share the case methods we used in Food Dignity.

Case Study Methods Used with Food Justice CBOs in the Anglophone Global North

NIFA issued the call for proposals that ultimately funded the Food Dignity project because so little about the extensive work of U.S. CBOs dedicated to creating food security and sustainability had been codified in writing, particularly in academic

literature (USDA NIFA, 2010). Since then, the body of empirical literature about community-led food security or justice work has been growing; though, it is arguably still short of being proportional to the problems that the work is tackling.

Much of this research has been bounded by a focus on one activity, campaign, or project, as opposed to on the work of a community organization (which would be doing multiple such activities, campaigns, and/or projects over time and with paid organizing staff). In the global North, this includes case studies of community gardens (e.g., Hallsworth & Wong, 2015; Hou, Johnson, & Lawson, 2009; Thrasher, 2016), mobile food markets (e.g., Robinson, Weissman, Adair, Potteiger, & Villanueva, 2016), community-supported agriculture (CSA) schemes (e.g., Cox, Kneafsey, Holloway, Dowler, & Venn, 2014; Hinrichs & Kremer, 2002; Kato, 2013), activist campaigns (e.g., Alkon & Guthman, 2017; Ballamingie & Walker, 2013), and farmers markets (e.g., Alkon, 2007; Lawson, Drake, & Fitzgerald, 2016). All of these studies provide descriptive cases and most present at least partial answers to questions about who does the activity, how and why, to what ends, and/or who benefits from it.

A few studies have taken on much wider boundaries to examine local food movements within geographical borders as cases. Wekerle (2004) examines the movement in Toronto, Canada, to identify social movement strategies and lessons for food justice more generally. His methods are not specified. At another extreme for both specificity of method and breadth of scope is a book by Alan Hunt (2015), which compares and contrasts cases of British and U.S. food movements to answer questions about governance, civic engagement, and policy change in each. Epistemologically, Hunt's study offers a high standard for rigor and transparency in case study methods about food movements. He takes full advantage of the book-length format to do so, including sharing lists of his interviews (26) and field participation and observations (56). Hunt also characterizes the circa 1100 documents he analyzed and how he analyzed

them. In the conclusion, he advocates for "scrutiny of whether the academic publications [about food movement work] are rooted in primary evidence or formed from academic discourse" (Hunt 2015, p. 217). Another geographic example is Meenar and Hoover's (2012) case study analyzing how much community gardens and urban farms in Philadelphia offer viable solutions for food insecurity. In addition to traditional interview and observation case study methods, they use surveys and geographic information system (GIS) mapping tools.

A 2006 review of alternative food network (AFN) case study research in Europe (they identify eight studies, all of which are about producers or producer cooperatives) notes that "whilst individually these papers provide interesting accounts of specific AFNs," the work as a whole "tells us little about the population of AFS or the transferability of the conclusions from these often highly localized case studies" (Venn et al., 2006, p. 253). Methodologically, the authors also complain that the methods and reasons behind case selection are often not specified and that reflection on their wider relevance is missing. The methods used in a recent study addressing the role of food banks in U.S. community food systems illustrate a systematic approach to case selection designed to generate transferable results. The authors began their research with a national survey of food banks, drawing primarily from Feeding America's supply network, and then selected 15 operations for deeper case studies (Vitiello, Grisso, Whiteside, & Fischman, 2015).

Case study research where the boundary (or unit of analysis) is a community-based food justice organization is very limited. This was our unit of analysis for the Food Dignity project: "Community" conscribed by hyperlocal geographic boundaries (at most a county or reservation) and "based" meaning the organization heavily includes leadership and other key stakeholders from within those boundaries. To date, I have identified 11 peer-reviewed publications (see Table 1) that substantially share both case study methods and empirical results about food justice CBOs.² The

for one of two reasons. One, I am sure that there are some that I simply did not find in my review; this paper provides

² This excludes Food Dignity-related publications and many food-justice-movement-related case studies that are not here

authors of these publications applied standard case study methods: collecting documents, interviews, and first-person observation data from and about the “case” CBO; analyzing these data inductively for emergent themes; analyzing these data deductively with their research questions and/or theoretical framework in mind; providing at least a few paragraphs that tell the story of the case; and then concluding with a summary of themes and at least provisional answers to their research questions. Some also specify member checking.

In addition, a project called Community and Regional Food Systems (<http://www.community-food.org>) released an edited book about their work in 2017. That project had the same timeline and USDA NIFA funding stream as Food Dignity and their team had also proposed to do case study research about community-based food justice work and organizations. However, in the preface, the editors describe their proposed plans for case study research as a “nonstarter.” They write, “Although our proposal was based on participatory research methods, it was apparent before we officially began that our community partners did not want to be studied” (Ventura & Bailey, 2017, p. 3). Perhaps as a result, most chapters do not describe the data or methods used.

Literature Lessons for Our Case Study Development

Almost every example of food justice-related case study research reviewed here has been published after we began our work in Food Dignity. However, that body of work has influenced my thinking and feeling about our own rigorous storytelling approaches in several ways that I summarize here and elaborate upon in the rest of this essay. This includes:

- Committing even more deeply to our approach of collecting extensive data and using multiple inductive methods for

analysis, per Hunt’s warning about remaining rooted in primary evidence rather than abstract academic discourse. We remind ourselves to avoid what I call “hand-waving” (i.e., making knowledge claims without rigorous empirical substantiation).

- Feeling reassured about the rigor, relevance, and guiding ethics of our case study research methods and outcomes. We used the methods outlined in Table 1, and more, for all five cases over more than five years.
- Asking narrower research questions of our data, including potentially asking some of the same questions posed in previous studies to examine the transferability of their conclusions.
- Being more explicit about how and why we chose to do these case studies with these five CBOs, as well as how transferable our findings might be, if at all, per critiques in the Venn et al. paper (2006).
- Valuing having multiple authors from both community and university organizations to improve the utility, insight, accessibility, and accuracy of our project products.
- Naming that we are each a co-investigator and an actor in the work we are studying.
- Considering ethical and epistemological implications of how community leadership in Food Dignity has led us to prioritize telling important and true stories about their work, specifically, vs. an academic tendency to center “the purpose of understanding a larger class of (similar) units” (Gerring, 2004, p. 342). For example, the former demands more inductive listening and analysis, including in setting the boundaries of the case; the latter encourages more narrowly focused boundaries and analysis, potentially conscribed by *a priori* research questions, and presumes transferability.

foundations for a (needed!) systematic literature review in this arena but is not one on its own. Two, I excluded many potential candidates because methods were not described and/or the central case focus was not a food justice CBO. For example, some case studies focus on a singular program, collaboration or activity (e.g., a community garden, a food

pantry, an advocacy campaign, a market); or on activities of an organization whose central activity is not food justice (e.g., a church). Other studies refer to or draw from case study research with CBOs, but the methods and findings are not centered on that organization.

I turn now to our case study methods and method development in Food Dignity. Also, though the methods of a larger project like ours are

not entirely comparable to methods in an individual publication, I have summarized core aspects of our case study design in the last row of Table 1.

Table 1. Purposes and Case Study Methods Used with Food System CBOs in 11 Publications

Author(s) , pub date; (Year(s) conducted); <i>Format</i> ; Academic discipline(s)*	Geography and organizations studied	Research question(s)	Methods Case notes, data sources [documentation and archival records (<i>docs</i>), interviews (<i>int</i>), focus groups (<i>focus</i>), participation/ observation (<i>P and/or O</i>)], analysis
Sbicca & Meyers 2017 (2010-2015; 2011-2014) <i>Journal paper</i> Sociology	Oakland & Brooklyn, U.S. <i>2 organizations</i> • Planting Justice (PJ) • East New York Farms! (ENYF!)	How have food justice racial projects opposed neoliberal racial projects that have stigmatized and criminalized communities of color?	Cases selected as representing the breadth of food justice movement struggles against neoliberal racial projects. Each author led one case, PJ and ENYF! respectively. <i>Docs</i> : extensive current and archival <i>Int</i> : 35; 10 <i>O</i> : board member and half-time volunteer work for months; seasonal work for 2 years plus many visits Analysis unspecified.
White & Bunn 2017 (2014) <i>Journal paper</i> Planning & Social and political sciences	Southside of Glasgow, UK <i>4 organizations</i> • Urban Roots • South Seeds • Locovore • Bellahouston Demonstration Garden	What have been the practices, purposes and histories of organizations doing urban agriculture (UA) work in this place? What are promising policy avenues for augmenting their voice and impact?	Cases selected for variation, methods provided per case. <i>Docs</i> : policy and media contexts <i>Int</i> : 9-11 in CBOs + 4 in context <i>O</i> : Visited each at least once, 3 formal O over several hours total. Authors collected and analyzed data. Transcripts coded, authors derived common framework, then "triangulated" with O data and docs.
Poulsen 2017 (Oct 2012-Oct 2013) <i>Journal paper</i> Public health	Baltimore, U.S. <i>2 organizations</i> • unnamed urban community farm • unnamed urban commercial farm	How do community vs. commercial farming models balance civic and economic exchange, prioritize food justice, and create socially inclusive spaces?	Cases selected from larger UA project for contrast. <i>Docs</i> : extensive in-case, e.g., meetings notes and emails <i>Int</i> : 21 <i>O</i> : 16 hours total on farm sites. Data collected with two masters students with analysis by author. Transcripts, O notes and docs coded. Developed summary report for each farm. Assessed data against 3 common critiques of neoliberalism in food justice work.
Reynolds & Cohen 2016 (2010-2012 & 2013-2014)* <i>Book</i> Geography & Planning and policy	New York City, U.S. <i>21 organizations</i> • See list pp. 149-153 • Includes East New York Farms!	How do UA groups in this place organize work for social justice, especially racial justice, through and beyond their food production work?	Revisited extensive study documenting UA action and benefits in NYC to examine how CBOs tackle and experience structural oppression and injustice in their UA work. <i>Docs</i> : policy docs and reports <i>Int</i> : 31 in first phase, unspecified additional for 2013 phase. <i>Focus</i> : 1 with interviewees + public forum with UA activists <i>P&O</i> : extensive & ongoing over 4 years Original study by a team of 7 including authors; authors did additional research for this study. Analyzed data for how disparities surface in UA in the city and UA strategies for tackling injustice.

Broad 2016 (2010-2013) * <i>Book</i> Communication & Journalism	Los Angeles, U.S. <i>1 organization plus</i> • Community Services Unlimited • Others in context	What does community-based food justice work yield, and what are CBO and policy approaches to increasing social justice impacts?	CBO chosen as “analytical entry point” to research questions; came to questions partly through personal involvement in food justice in LA. <i>Docs:</i> 100s of primary docs, websites <i>Int:</i> >30 <i>P&O:</i> extensive & ongoing, with field notes Author collected and analyzed data. Regularly shared and checked with stakeholders/participants. Analyzed data for practices and lessons on community-based social change and food justice in an age of neoliberalism with a “communication ecology” lens.
Warshawsky 2015 (2013-2014 + context since 2006) <i>Journal paper</i> Geography	Los Angeles, U.S. <i>1 organization</i> • Food Forward	What are challenges in food waste governance in this place and what role do CBOs play in food waste reduction?	Reason for CBO choice unspecified, though implied as it is major regional player in food recovery. <i>Docs:</i> institutional reports <i>Int:</i> 7 with CBO + 43 with people in context <i>O:</i> “when possible” Author collected and analyzed data. Transcripts classified “by quotation content” and analyzed with “triangulation.”
Passidomo 2014 (2010-2012) <i>Journal paper</i> Geography	New Orleans, U.S. <i>3 organizations</i> • Hollygrove Market & Farm • Lower Ninth Ward Food Access Coalition • Latino Farmers’ Cooperative of Louisiana	How do food sovereignty discourses and activism impact the material realities and equity in low- income communities of color in which food justice work is frequently situated?	CBOs for “vignettes” selected for variation in city neighborhood of origin. Different methods described for each. Conversation and <i>O</i> with first organization. <i>O</i> over several CBO meetings organized by second. <i>PO</i> (volunteering) and <i>int</i> with third. Author collected and analyzed data. Methods more implicit than explicit, but analyzed data inductively for themes and deductively through a “right to the city” framework.
Ramirez 2015 (2010-2013) <i>Journal paper</i> Geography	Seattle, U.S. <i>1 organization plus</i> • Clean Greens • Another with pseudonym for contrast	How black food geographies can enact a decolonial politics and provide transformative spaces, in contrast with white ones that may limit both?	Chose two organizations in one neighborhood predominately of color, one black-led and one white- led, to illuminate answers to research question. <i>Docs:</i> not specified, but results imply archival for neighborhood context <i>Int:</i> several, with leaders of each organization <i>P&O:</i> occasional volunteering and then active participation in Clean Greens; visited other a few times.
Sbicca 2012 (2009)* <i>Journal paper</i> Sociology	Oakland, U.S. <i>1 organization</i> • People’s Grocery	How well and with whom do anti- oppression ideology underpinnings of CBO food justice work to mobilize action, especially by class?	Did a case study generally because of “paucity of studies” on CBOs, and with this one in particular because past research on them was not useful to the organization and the director was interested in research with their internship program. <i>Docs:</i> primary from CBO and any related to CBO online <i>Int:</i> 17 (7 with staff and 10 with interns.) <i>P&O:</i> interned for three months at 20 hours a week (~240 hours) Author collected and analyzed data. Coded for understandings of food justice and CBO’s work for it, for understanding local context; analyzed for these themes and to compare intern vs. staff understandings.

White 2011 (2009) <i>Journal paper</i> Sociology	Detroit, U.S. <i>1 organization</i> • D-town Farm/Detroit Black Community Food Security Network	What are lessons for how to foster community building and political agency from this CBO's work?	Implied case study choice as this CBO explicitly strives for community and political agency building, explicitly chosen for author interest in Black farmers in UA. <i>Docs:</i> on CBO history and context <i>Int:</i> 10 <i>P&O:</i> not mentioned explicitly, but implied e.g., attending meetings. Author collected and analyzed data. Coded for understandings "community" and "resistance," themes of agency and responsibility, and farmer perspectives on land use in UA.
McCutcheon 2011 (2009-2010) <i>Book chapter</i> Geography	Calhoun Falls, S. Carolina, + national, U.S. <i>2 organizations</i> • Beulah Land Farms of Pan African Orthodox Church • Nation of Islam food work	How does race and/or racial identity drive ideology and food and health action? What are their concepts of community and self-reliance? How does this contribute to "just sustainability" for the organizations and for blacks in the U.S. generally?	Detailed explanation of why cases chosen, including to offer unique insights into race and alternative food movements, and almost no research done about their food work. <i>Docs:</i> deep and extensive archival research with both <i>P&O:</i> worked at the Beulah Land Farms as researcher Author collected and analyzed data using research questions as guide to provide detailed histories, motivations, strategies and actions of each and lessons.

Summary of overall Food Dignity project case study methods:

Porter et. al. (2010-2017 + Whole Community Project since 2006) <i>Multiple formats</i> Community partners with a community-centered lens; academic partners in nutrition, education, geography, sociology, anthropology, economics, & agro/ecology.	Alameda County, California; Wind River Reservation & Laramie, Wyoming; Ithaca & Brooklyn, New York; U.S. <i>5 organizations</i> • Dig Deep Farms • Blue Mountain Associates • Feeding Laramie Valley • Whole Community Project • East New York Farms!	How do, can, and should U.S. communities build community-led food systems that generate sustainable food security for all?	Case collaborators invited for geographic and organizational diversity, combined with practical considerations of travel distance between academic and community partners and of pre-existing connections and relationships. <i>Docs:</i> >1000 of primary docs from CBO and any related to CBO online <i>Int:</i> 150 with 121 community stakeholders and co-investigators <i>P&O:</i> extensive & ongoing by multiple insider and outsider investigators, with field notes by academic investigators, over >5 years <i>Digital storytelling:</i> including 16 first-person videos <i>Collaborative pathway modelling:</i> 5 Multiple investigators collecting and analyzing, including team coding and narrative inquiry; later a much wider array of analysis methods, either narrowed and honed to answer more specific sub-research questions or broadened to capture larger truths than such technical methods could identify.
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* Academic disciplines represent the PhDs earned by the authors as listed in their curricula vitae online. Other details marked with an asterisk are not explicit in the publications cited and were provided or confirmed via personal communication with the authors.

Methods Used for this Methods Paper

The next sections of this essay include a relatively technical report on our case study methods, including my report and reflections on how and

why we came to use these methods. Data sources include original and annual renewal project proposals to USDA; memos and emails I wrote about methods to other team members; methods sections

of our codified work to date; and detailed emails and meeting notes from in-person and phone discussions among team members about our research approaches.

Then, the final section embeds the above within a larger question about how to conduct this Food Dignity case study research with about three dozen co-investigators in nine organizations fissured by and riddled with systemic inequities. Particularly prominent inequities included ones created by racism, classism, and, what I call “academic supremacy.” Academic supremacy refers to systemic inequities between community-based and academic organizations (Porter & Wechsler, 2018). I offer reflections and lessons from our experience, rather than conclusions. To inform my analysis, I consulted the data above plus additional data sources, including internal national team meeting notes and audio recordings. I also reviewed the transcripts of six interviews that three project partners and one external interviewer conducted with me between 2011 and 2016. Having spent about half my working life on this project over the last seven years, I have also consulted my memory, which I corrected, corroborated, or supplemented by re-reading these data sets and other materials, as needed, while writing this paper.

This essay represents my own experience, analysis, reflections, and learning as project director, principal investigator, and co-investigator. Several Food Dignity co-investigators have reviewed this essay for factual accuracy. In addition, Monica Hargraves provided substantial and insightful commentary on an earlier version. I am grateful for the resulting corrections and improvements. Moreover, my “reflections and learning” described here derive largely from lessons, wisdom, and questions that my teachers, mentors, friends and co-investigators offered over the past decade, especially during these last seven years of Food Dignity. I am responsible for any errors, mischaracterizations, and blindness in this work; I am also responsible for the ways in which this essay is extractive (i.e., I took knowledge, mentorship, and wisdom, digested and integrated it with my own, and now share what I learned as sole author).

Food Dignity Case Study Methods and Method Development

Deciding to Design Food Dignity

In the 2009–10 academic year, I was finishing my Ph.D. The **Whole Community Project** (WCP) in Ithaca, New York was the subject of one of my dissertation case studies. The WCP project director, E. Jemila Sequeira, had been mentoring me in community organizing and anti-racism for two years. She had also become a close friend. I felt committed to securing more funds to help sustain and expand the deeply grassroots food justice work she was leading. I also wanted the world to learn from and about the extensive wisdom and knowledge of community food justice organizers, including Sequeira. The meager opportunities I could find for funding action (as opposed to research), combined with my wish to document and amplify activist expertise, moved me from claiming that I would never become an academic to applying for tenure-track professor jobs.

Then, in January 2010, I read the USDA NIFA Global Food Security call for developing “research, education, and extension sustainable programs on local and regional food systems that will increase food security in disadvantaged U.S. communities and create viability in local economies.” It required that “active participation of disadvantaged communities should guide the project’s assessment of best practices” and included “community organizing” as an example of extension activities (USDA, 2010). I would have felt that the call had been written specifically for me, had I not felt so daunted by its US\$5 million scale. I tried and failed to convince any senior colleagues to let me help them apply. I accepted an assistant professor position at the University of Wyoming (UW). I considered the advice I generally proffered about small grants: if you have good people with a good plan, you can secure money for it. I decided to try assembling great people and a good plan to support, learn from, and learn with food justice CBOs in the U.S.

Inviting Partners

I started with WCP. Sequeira and I had been discussing the best ways to systematically support grassroots food justice work like that of WCP for

at least a year. I admired and wanted to learn more from her work. I had been involved in WCP since its inception in 2006 and had reams of case study data and analysis already in hand. Finally, housed within Cornell Cooperative Extension in Tompkins County, WCP offered a potentially transferable institutional context. Sequeira and her supervisor immediately agreed to collaborate.

In choosing which CBOs to invite as partners in addition to WCP from a research perspective, I wanted to maximize variation in the organizations and their contexts. From a feasibility perspective, I considered constraints of travel, including proximity between community-based and university-based partners to enable frequent documentation, participation, observation, and collaboration. (At the time, I did not even consider the possibility of having a CBO partner that was more than a few hours drive from an academic partner.) Also, I needed to assemble the team quickly to finalize a proposal before the June application deadline, and each CBO needed to have an umbrella organization with 501(c)(3) status so that the organization could accept and manage a subaward.

I asked leaders of **East New York Farms!** (ENYF) in Brooklyn, New York. ENYF was founded in 1998 and housed in a community center (United Community Centers) in a diverse and dense urban setting. WCP had once co-hosted a food justice event in Ithaca, New York with them. A non-incorporated local foods organization in Laramie pointed me to a person organizing food-sharing activities in what later became **Feeding Laramie Valley** (FLV) of Laramie, Wyoming, which is housed within a very experienced not-for-profit social change organization called Action Resources International. **Dig Deep Farms** (DDF), located in the Bay area of California, was founded at about the same time I was organizing the proposal. Under the auspices of a police activities league (Deputy Sheriff's Activities League), DDF was founded by an officer in the Alameda County Sheriff's Department. I only

heard of it because the person who had agreed to be a liaison between universities and communities in the project had later agreed to become DDF's general manager with the other half of his time. I thought having a CBO associated with local government would add institutional diversity, and having someone who was "inside" one of the CBOs as part of the project-wide team would bring at least as many advantages as disadvantages. I also wanted to include a tribal-led CBO with ties to Wind River Indian Reservation (the only reservation in Wyoming). I believed that such an organization would offer different, possibly paradigmatically different, expertise and experience about food insecurity and sustainability compared to the other four partnering CBOs. After several months of my increasingly desperate search for such a partner, a Wyoming cooperative extension agent put me in touch with **Blue Mountain Associates** (BMA). For reasons the leaders of these organizations outline elsewhere in this issue, they each accepted my invitation to participate in Food Dignity and began contributing to the project design (Daftary-Steel, 2018; Neideffer, 2018; Sequeira, 2018; Sutter, 2018; Woodsum, 2018).

I also assembled a project-wide team including people from **UW, Cornell University, Ithaca College**, and from a "think-and-do" tank called Center for Popular Education, Research, and Policy (**C-PREP**; which is led by the person who also connected me with DDF). On that front, I began by inviting collaborators whom I knew and trusted and who had relevant academic expertise. However, at UW, I simply cold-contacted people who appeared to have relevant expertise. I did not yet know anyone there (we developed the proposal while I was still a Ph.D. candidate living in Ithaca, New York), but I thought reviewers would find an application without collaborators at my own institution implausible. Several people from each organization—community and academic—became project co-investigators.³

³ In 2013, the C-PREP/Food Dignity relationship changed. Gayle Woodsum, founder of FLV and executive director of Actions Resources International, became the community-university liaison and re-shaped that role. In 2014, the C-

PREP/Food Dignity relationship ended. A research staff member who had been working under the auspices of C-PREP, Katie Bradley, was also a graduate student at University of California, Davis (UC Davis). To retain her as part of the

Summary Elements of Our Research Design

Described according to the five components of case study design outlined by Yin (2009, p. 27), the key elements of the Food Dignity case study research design with the five partnering CBOs are:

- *The study's research questions.* How do, can, and should U.S. communities build community-led food systems that generate sustainable food security for all? More specifically, we examined how each of five CBOs catalyzes and supports that goal and, more provisionally, the outcomes of and lessons from its work.
- *Study propositions.* As we wrote in our proposal to USDA, we took the ethical stance that human and community agency in food systems is an end in itself, while hypothesizing that building civic and institutional capacity to engage in sustainable community food systems for food security action would improve the sustainability and equity of local food systems and economies.
- *Unit of analysis.* The five CBOs are our organizational unit of analysis. This “unit” includes as much current and historical context as each CBO deems important for understanding their organization’s work. The CBO leaders were better placed to know where to draw those boundaries than outsiders (see also Bartlett & Vavrus, 2017). Within the CBOs, we have also conducted some nested studies more narrowly documenting a sub-set of their work (e.g., a farmers market).
- *Logic linking data to propositions and criteria for interpreting the findings.* These components are described in the sections that follow. Key elements of this logic and criteria included:
 - i. A “hyper” triangulation of data and analysis via multiple investigators collecting and analyzing multiple forms of data using multiple methods over at least five years.

- ii. Development of a collaborative pathway model with each CBO, linking activities with actual or anticipated outcomes.
- iii. Examination of how each CBO invested and leveraged a US\$67,800-a-year “community organizing support package” as a partial indicator of what food system change strategies they found most successful, promising, and/or important.
- iv. Regularly checking analysis and interpretations with multiple community-based and university-based co-investigators and stakeholders.

Data Sources

We gathered multiple forms of case study data with, from, and about each CBO between 2010 and 2017. The four main types of CBO case study data we have collected over seven years are:

1. *Documentation and archival records.* We collected and read thousands of files, later filtered (per analysis section below) to 100-200 key documents per CBO for more detailed analysis. These included:
 - a. CBO-provided files dating from before our collaboration began (e.g., grant applications, memos, fliers, reports, etc.).
 - b. Public documentation and records such as news media, videos, and any previous research with the CBOs. Academic partners searched for these retrospectively and concurrently.
 - c. CBO-based and project-wide teams gathering additional data files during the project.
2. *Interviews* (150 total, transcribed and analyzed):
 - a. Of project co-investigators and other stakeholders playing central roles at partnering CBOs ($n=71$), conducted by co-investigators, often multiple times ($n=100$ total interviews).

team, I created a new subaward with UC Davis that supported her in finishing her PhD studies and then as a postdoctoral

scholar. Technically, UC Davis became our fourth academic partner at that time.

- b. Of additional CBO stakeholders (e.g., minigrants, gardeners, market vendors, interns) ($n=50$).
3. *Participation and observations* over five years:
 - a. Ongoing, by full-time “insiders” who are CBO employees and Food Dignity co-investigators, recorded mainly via interviews, discussions with academic partners, meeting notes, and in annual reports; sometimes in private journals and/or field notes.
 - b. In frequent visits to CBOs by local academic “outsiders” (graduate students, research staff, and/or faculty) who reside nearby, usually recorded in field notes.
 - c. During visits to CBOs by projectwide team members who did not live locally and during informal community-academic meetings when co-presenting at conferences, recorded in field notes. For example, I made 31 total visits to the four CBOs (excluding FLV, which is located where I live and work) over five years.
 - d. Documentation of our 7 national team meetings in detailed process notes made by project staff and graduate students.
4. *Products* by co-investigators:
 - a. Food Dignity Collaborative Pathway Models ($n=5$, one with each CBO) (Hargraves et al., 2017).
 - b. Digital stories, including 16 first-person ones (Food Dignity, 2015).
 - c. Community migrant programs developed by each CBO ($n=4$, US\$30,000 awarded in each; DDF did not develop a migrant program) and brief reports on each individual project funded ($n=92$) (Hargraves, 2018a).
 - d. Our presentations.
 - e. Our publications.
 - f. Annual reports by CBO and academic partners to me and reports by me to the funders.

These data forms were part of the original planned research design, with the exception of

digital stories and the collaborative pathway models as explained below.

Digital stories

The digital stories originated with a suggestion by Sarita Daftary-Steel, the program director of ENYF, during the proposal design phase. She suggested adding Photovoice based on a previous good experience ENYF had using that participatory method. After brief discussions, we added this method to the scope and budget of each CBO and to the overall project outlined in the proposal. We included a formal training in Photovoice methods as part of our first team meeting in May 2011. During and after that training, several co-investigators who were also experienced community organizers said they had been using similar, semistructured methods of photo narrative in their pursuit of social change for decades before academics codified it as a research method (Wang & Burris, 1997). We agreed to broaden the approach options beyond the formal Photovoice methods to include other means of photo and video narrative and storytelling.

By 2013, each CBO had adapted Photovoice methods or designed their own processes for creating a set of narrated photos to publicly share information about food justice, injustice, and systems work in their communities with community stakeholder groups of their choice (see <http://www.fooddignity.org>). CBO leaders have also produced multiple video stories about their work. For our sixth national team meeting in January 2015, co-investigators decided to commission a three-day digital storytelling workshop. This yielded 16 first-person digital stories and a minidocumentary (Food Dignity, 2015), plus several other video products. These first-person videos are key data sources for some papers in this issue (see, e.g., Gaechter & Porter, 2018; Porter, 2018a). More importantly, they are profound, published products in their own right.

Collaborative pathway models

The Cornell co-investigator who led the migrant program evaluations with the CBOs in Food Dignity, Hargraves, also brought expertise in pathway modeling. That modeling method provides an

inductive means of producing visual theory-of-change models by linking program activities to (desired and actual) short, medium, and long-term outcomes with directional arrows. When Hargraves joined the project team in June 2011, she told me and several others about pathway modeling (Urban & Trochim, 2009), suggesting it might serve our project goals.

At first glance, the complexity and time demands of that modeling process, coupled with the spaghetti-looking mess of the resulting models, made me skeptical about the approach for our project. After our first Food Dignity team meeting in May 2011, tensions were already high between my demands for a high quality and quantity of data from CBO co-investigators vs. their priorities relating to community action. As I came to understand later, the insufficiency of the CBO subaward funding to cover direct and opportunity costs of investing in research tasks that did not immediately support their priority actions exacerbated this tension (see the discussion here and also Porter & Wechsler, 2018, this issue). But even then, I could not imagine proposing that CBOs do even more.

However, in 2014, Sequeira, the WCP director, was seeking ways to document and illustrate the complexity and outcomes of her food justice work. Pathway modeling seemed worth trying. As described elsewhere, ultimately each CBO helped to reshape the modeling approach to rest on a values foundation, and then seized on ways such co-developed models could serve their organizations. With an additional collaborator recruited to help with this major addition to our methods, Hargraves worked with co-investigators and other stakeholders at each CBO to develop a model (Hargraves & Denning, 2018).

The resulting set of five Food Dignity Collaborative Pathway Models articulate the activities, expertise, goals, and strategies of each of the five CBOs (Hargraves et al., 2017). If a case study with each CBO was analogous to a person's body, I have come to think of the models as illustrating the combined skeletal, circulatory, nervous, and muscular systems of each organization—including the (even) more metaphorical hearts and brains of the organizations and their work. They each stand on their own as a rich and rigorous form of non-

narrative case study. The models also provide rich data sources for further analysis.

Data Analysis and Discussion

Here, I take an auto-ethnographic approach to describing and discussing how we analyzed our data, how we changed our analysis approaches, and why.

Asking three questions: Do, would, and should

Our leading research question—how do, can, and should U.S. communities build community-led food systems that generate sustainable food security for all?—is really made up of three questions.

Given the dearth of research on these questions with food justice CBOs back in 2010, when we proposed this project, the *do* question's descriptive focus was the primary one we proposed to answer. It was also the one we hoped to answer most completely, using all the case study methods outlined here with the five CBOs partnering in Food Dignity. In particular, the collaborative pathway models outline every core activity each CBO does and why. We are analyzing the rest of our data to illustrate and demonstrate how, and how much, the CBOs engage in these activities.

We have reframed the *can* question more narrowly as a *would* question: if CBOs had more resources, how would they spend it? In other words, we agreed that highlighting how the five CBOs spend their time and the additional resources provided by the Food Dignity subawards would help illuminate their priorities, needs, and strengths by representing their best bets for achieving their goals based on their expertise and experience. Therefore, our primary data for answering this question came from analyzing the annual narrative and financial reports written by each CBO describing how and why they invested their Food Dignity funding. Other key case study data informing our answers to that question are the long-term outcomes in the pathway models, migrant program designs and awards, grant applications for other funding, interviews with CBO leaders, and any products (beyond the annual reports) authored by CBO co-investigators.

We founded the project on the ethical meaning

of *should*: in a democratic society, we have an ethical imperative to invest in civic capacity and control, including in building sustainable community food systems for food security. Empirically, we aimed to document and provisionally assess diverse ways in which CBOs can make such investments (e.g., minigrants for action, support for professional development travel, mentorship). We also sought to determine how much these investments contribute to community food systems and the local leadership within them. For documenting these actions, with process and early outcomes, we combined case study methods with other research methods. The other methods have included quantifying garden harvests (Conk & Porter, 2016), conducting a small randomized controlled trial on the impact of minigrants (Porter, McCrackin, & Naschold, 2016), and assessing cover crop contributions to urban garden soil fertility (Gregory, Leslie, & Drinkwater, 2016).

In all three questions, we aim to characterize and partially assess the CBOs' work within the context of the activities and goals they specified in their collaborative pathway models. In other words, we are anchoring our primary analysis within this internal frame of the CBOs' goals. However, in secondary analyses across cases, we are also imposing external lenses to help characterize the collective contributions of CBOs to the national food justice, food security, and food system movements. For example, this might include asking the research questions posed by the studies in Table 1 of our own data set. These kinds of analyses appear in included papers discussed in the "asking more specific questions" section below.

Shifting modes of listening

As principal investigator, seeking epistemological as well as ethical rigor, I wanted to find ways to systematically listen to our data and to the expertise

of community-based co-investigators. I had proposed semi-open coding across documents from all five CBOs as one of the key research methods. For the first three years of the project, I led a small team of four part-time research staff members to develop a large, relatively generic coding vocabulary of 102 codes in seven categories.⁴ We then apply it to analyze the textual data collected. For example, an array of codes under the category of "action" were designed to help us map what each CBO was doing within different parts of the food system (i.e., to what extent did they focus on producing food, teaching people production skills, labor issues, etc.). We also developed a file naming system where a prefix identified the date, partner (e.g., UW, DDF, ENYF), any sub-project focus (e.g., minigrant or a CBO-specific program), and file content type (e.g., flier, email, grant application, field notes).

I assigned a team member to organize and code each CBO's files. I also read all the data files, examined reports from each CBO's "hermeneutic unit" (we used Atlas.ti, which uses that phrase to identify each set of coded files), and spot-duplicated some coding to check for overall consistency in our use of the codes. At first, we coded nearly all incoming and historical files. Later, though we always read, categorized, and saved every file, we began filtering to code only those that added new information. For example, if a CBO provided several files about one workshop, we would code just one or two with the most data in them (e.g., notes from the workshop and a handout provided, but not flyers and email announcements).

Organizing and coding the files made co-investigators from outside the CBOs read them closely. This enabled academic co-investigators to learn key elements of the history, context, and actions of each organization. However, by 2013, insights from insider and outsider time spent

⁴ These categories (with a few examples of subcodes within each) were: money (e.g., cash flow, grant administration, sales), action (e.g., bees, labor conditions, donate food, garden, raise public awareness), context (e.g., individual, national, CBO project), definitions (e.g., community, dignity, sustainability), Food Dignity support package themes (e.g., minigrants, community and academic relations, research), overarching/big

picture (e.g., success, challenge, disagreement), strategies in use (e.g., framing, networking/partnering, ceremony/celebrate, start where people are), and themes (e.g., poverty, values, crime/violence including prevention, oppression). These exclude dozens more CBO-specific codes (e.g., identifying Whole Community Project's work on Gardens for Humanity or Dig Deep Farms' work on Furthering Youth Inspiration).

together (i.e., participation and observation), internal annual reports, and a more holistic analysis of interviews and field notes (i.e., narrative inquiry; see for example Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) meant that this generic coding was no longer adding to our understanding or information about the CBOs' work. In addition, community-based investigators were increasingly sharing sensitive data that were not suitable for sharing with all members of the coding team (e.g., confidential personnel information and talk about other Food Dignity collaborators). Also, much of this "data" was increasingly conveying complex forms of analysis, interpretation, and insight, unsuitable for the depersonalized and decontextualized slicing and dicing that coding entails. By mid-2013 we were no longer coding generically in this central way. We needed new approaches to analyzing our data.

Actually, we had needed new approaches to analyzing our data from the start of this project. As mentioned above, I led a small team in developing a shared coding approach. This was within our first six months. In November 2011, at our second all-team meeting, I presented the approach to the Food Dignity team. I was simultaneously trying to explain technically what coding is, while soliciting feedback about how to improve our approach. When I listen now to the audio of that meeting, I deem my approach to be a triple fumble. One, it was a little late to be asking for substantial participation and collaboration, for the first time, on an already-piloted design. Two, I explained even the technical basics concerning the purpose of coding so poorly, that today even I can hardly follow what I was trying to say. Three, I initially failed to respond to some profound and insightful questions and concerns, both scientific and ethical; I simply repeated technical details and vague reassurances that the CBOs would be able to review and co-interpret reports from the academic team's coding. As the project PI, I held systemic privileges and powers that meant I generally kept getting the ball back, even after a series of fumbles such as those.

⁵ I was neither the first nor last person on the team to struggle with challenges of this sort and scale. I mention my own situation here because it so heavily impacted how I

When I listen to the 2011 audio of that conversation, I hear both community and academic-based leaders striving to shape a shared path towards a shared goal, while also generously encouraging, enabling, and allowing me, personally, to try again.

Near the end of that coding discussion, we agreed that we needed to find a way to do this kind of analysis together, in ways that serve common food justice goals while also fulfilling commitments we made in the project proposal. Then I said, "There aren't a whole lot of models for that." People laughed. I added:

Especially something as complex as this, even as straight up academic research, even if we did it conventionally, it would be hard. But that's not what I set out to do. That's not what you came here to do. That is not what we set out to do. That is not what we're going to do. And that story, the story that is unfolding here, I think will be the most important thing out of this [project].

However, I kept charging forward with only minor modifications to that coding approach for at least two more years before finally stopping, mostly because it was not proving to be epistemologically useful as a way to listen (which, for the record, was one of the concerns raised by community co-investigators that November, and later raised by the other members of the coding team).

I was afraid to stop because I still did not know what our new way should be. Normally, I would not have tolerated such uncertainty for long. However, in December 2012, I had also become a stage-3 breast cancer patient. The physical, emotional, and temporal drains of an eight-month treatment regime suddenly made me feel patient about, or at least resigned to, this methodological uncertainty. My exhaustion, plus more important things to be afraid of than not coding Food Dignity textual data, rendered me an increasingly participatory PI.⁵

participated in and led the project thereafter. (I would like to note that I have no reasons to believe, at the time of this writing, that I am anything but healthy.)

Telling a different story

From the start of the project, I had described to the team of Food Dignity co-investigators my image of a series of five, 10-15 page case stories about the work of each food justice CBO. They would all follow a similar format, containing similar sections, and would be useful both for our research project and to the CBOs. I recall people nodding politely.

When I began talking seriously about implementing this plan, Gayle Woodsum (FLV founder and Food Dignity community-university liaison) noted that my case outlines would not result in stories. My plans would reduce forests of meaning about what each CBO does and why to tree stands of facts. I conceded, recasting “that nuts and bolts information as being an appendix to the case studies.” She was still worried that some people might confuse those “nuts and bolts” with the real stories, noting, “I’ve spent years trying to get a different story, so I don’t want this [nuts and bolts] to be seen as the core of the case studies.” But we agreed I could try attaching my “appendices” to the real case stories, which would be produced primarily by community-based coinvestigators.

Then, under my guidance, one of the research staff collaborators followed my outline to draft one of these “appendix base cases” about DDF’s work. On perhaps our fifth redraft, and in the face of near silence from community-based co-investigators at DDF about our drafts (who have always given feedback before and since), she finally proclaimed the product as “heartless.” I finally admitted that my proposed approach was more like busywork rather than being the rigorous, evidence-based and useful foundation for the rest of our work that I had envisioned. I finally realized that the collaborative pathway models that Hargraves & Denning were developing with stakeholders and co-investigators at each CBO filled that role, and more, in our case study work. In addition to being a rigorously and systematically produced form of structured and explicit knowledge (i.e., research), the models also surface expertise that community-based co-investigators developed over decades of community organizing experience.

Sharing voices, but not risk

Academic voices frequently drown out the stories of people who are doing the work being studied and obscure the expertise that guides them, including in Food Dignity. For example, the coding vocabularies and my case outlines were pressing academic frameworks onto the CBOs’ data and expertise. Though such externally imposed approaches can help answer some narrow research questions and helped me to grasp basic facts and truths of each case, they were excluding and obscuring too much insight to enable rigorous and useful storytelling about the CBOs’ work. I had been asking myself and co-investigators how we should shift our listening; the answer was largely entwined with who should be doing the talking.

Doing research is usually part of an academic’s job description. For example, even though the Food Dignity grant has ended, I still am paid to do research for 65% of my time, nine months out of each year. I was paid and, in other ways, rewarded for the time I invested in writing this paper. This is one reason that academic voices are prominent in Food Dignity, especially mine, such as in this paper and the case study research process it describes.

This kind of time, space, and support for research is, comparatively speaking, almost non-existent for community co-investigators in Food Dignity. Harking back to that November 2011 team meeting, I kept mentioning the research budget each CBO had as part of their subawards, saying, for example, “Of course you have your own research questions, and have a research budget to do whatever makes sense for you. To support your labor in providing files to us, or to hire researchers or yourselves to document and tell your story.” I was referring to research budgets I had proposed and then allocated to each CBO partner; these averaged US\$12,900 per organization each year for staff time to assist the lead community organizers (Porter & Wechsler, 2018). Unlike academic partners, no CBO staff joined the project with pre-existing job descriptions or goals that included doing the kinds of research I was asking for.

In my view, much of our most useful, richest, newest and truest knowledge generation and dissemination in this project has come from work in which community-based researchers served as

lead or sole authors. The digital stories and collaborative pathway models are the prime examples of this. The digital stories indicate the importance of making direct investments in offering time, space, and technical support for knowledge codification in production. Academic partners receive this kind of support and time in spades, usually as a core function of their paid jobs. Creating this option for community partners requires intentionality, funding, interest, and attention to opportunity costs. In this vein, we also organized a small writing retreat in September 2015 for interested partners. Their work forms case stories that we are releasing in phases on a renewed project website, and might also share in book form. In addition, the collaborative pathway modeling illustrates the value of sharing community expertise. It also illustrates how academic partners can sometimes help supply and apply frameworks and methods to assist with that, without being overly reductive.

Yet, for CBO leaders, the opportunity costs of doing research are extremely high. Funding is necessary to help bridge this, especially in small organizations. With ENYF, we once had the chance to partly resolve this issue when Daftary-Steel stepped down as the program's director, was in between jobs, and was interested in leading the ENYF case study research. Using a dynamic presentation software (Prezi), and archive and file assistance from an academic partner, she developed and narrated a tour of the drivers, actions, and meanings of ENYF's first 12 years of work (Daftary-Steel & Gervais, 2015). In response to interest from other partner CBOs, she developed a market guide (Daftary-Steel, 2014) and, later, a youth program guide (Daftary-Steel, 2015). Drawing on her expertise regarding unattainable demands some funders made of ENYF, she led a collaboration with someone at DDF and an academic partner to document it (Daftary-Steel, Herrera, & Porter, 2016). She developed those ideas and the fuller story of ENYF into a book chapter, in partnership with people still at ENYF and academic partners (Daftary-Steel, Porter, Gervais, Marshall, & Vigil, 2017). Most recently, she co-produced a video about the variety of forms of urban agriculture, contrasting the community-centered origins and activities of ENYF with high-

tech, sometimes profit-centered urban food production projects (Daftary-Steel & Noguera, 2017). With the chance to develop research products while no longer simultaneously directing a CBO, she was highly prolific.

However, community organizers leaving their CBOs to do full-time research is hardly a desirable or scalable solution to the issue of how to share their voices. Paid sabbaticals and part-time endowed chair positions might be a viable solution. Grant awards or subawards that support CBOs in hiring research staff, on salary, not just stipends, might be another.

Finally, even if direct and opportunity costs are covered, CBOs still face another layer of risk in participating in, or being the subject of, research: results might be used in ways that harm the goals and interests of their organization and community. Harking back again to our November 2011 team meeting, one community leader spoke explicitly about how our results might shape USDA funding policy for decades to come, for better or possibly for worse. Over the years of our collaboration, co-investigators based at four of the five partnering CBOs independently and explicitly told me that even if *I* do not use the knowledge they share in ways that would harm their work, others might once we disseminate it.

That said, the risks of harm are even greater, probably, within a collaboration. In a September 2011 interview, after I had listed several of my fears about leading the project, the academic co-investigator interviewing me asked, "what do you think is the worst thing you could do?" I answered, to "make any one or all of the community partners feel betrayed, to betray their trust." I paused, adding, while laughing at myself, "to the extent to which I have their trust." I then admitted, "I probably already have [betrayed] in small ways," telling a story about how I had set up interviews with people in the Ithaca food movement without having consulted with Sequeira, the WCP community organizer. My *striving* to be a trustworthy academic partner does not mean *I* am entirely so. My academic, race, and class privileges offer me hundreds of blind spots, which are always difficult—

and never convenient⁶—for me to identify and remove.

During this project, I was awarded an endowed chair position and then tenure and a promotion. I sit in that chair now, or enjoy the standing desk option UW has provided, lauding the wisdom and expertise of the community co-investigators. One of the five CBOs was dissolved at the end of the Food Dignity funding—WCP. Sequeira is one of several community co-investigators who have since lost their jobs. Our collaboration did not cause this, but certainly did not prevent it either.

In sum, I asked community-based activists to collaborate on research in Food Dignity because I knew their insight, experience, expertise, and leadership were essential to generating new, relevant knowledge about building food-secure, sustainable and equitable communities. Even if I had adequately budgeted to cover direct and opportunity costs, and even if I had stepped back enough to “share voices” as much as I had claimed I meant to, the CBOs would still have been taking all of these risks above, whereas academics like myself stand mostly to benefit.⁷

Asking more specific questions

Starting in 2015, small teams or individual coinvestigators began asking more specific research questions of our growing catalog of case study data. With those narrower questions in mind, investigators returned to coding textual data. This time, they focused on relevant data subsets and developing coding approaches specific to their research questions. For example, for a paper in this issue (Porter, 2018a), I searched our interviews, documents, digital story video transcripts, and collaborative pathway models for every instance

and variation of food-production-related words to characterize the production related activities and goals of the five CBOs. A graduate student examined a subset of our data for social movement framing used by Food Dignity co-investigators (Gaechter & Porter, 2018). Another paper assesses case study data along with several other data forms to outline outcomes of gardening (Porter, 2018b).

As an academic, I am interested in these questions as well as questions that have been asked in previous studies, such as those listed in Table 1. I do not feel, however, that I could make a convincing argument to community co-investigators in Food Dignity describing how these are substantively more than academic questions. Even if we do manage to ask and help answer some of these most pressing questions, knowledge gaps arguably make up only a small part of the chasm between society today and a society with food justice.

Verifying credibility and rigor

“Triangulation” is an oft-cited approach for checking and verifying research analysis and results, especially in qualitative research. Methods theorists describe four kinds of triangulation (Denzin, 1978; Patton, 2002, p. 247). Each kind is listed below, along with the ways in which we employed triangulation in the Food Dignity case study research:

- *Data triangulation*, i.e., using a variety of data sources. We have gathered and are analyzing myriad forms and quantities of data sources, as outlined above.
- *Investigator triangulation*, i.e., several researchers analyzing the data. In the parable of blind men feeling an elephant,

⁶ I intend the superficiality of this word, “convenient,” to convey how insidiously daily the maintenance of systemic oppression is, and my own blithe complicity and contribution to it.

⁷ I have often heard academics describe risks of engaging in participatory research (as opposed to, for example, research that excludes the communities involved or that is not about community-level issues). Sharing power, via collaboration, does reduce academic control, which can feel risky (though also, as I have briefly begun to outline in this paper, it also improves relevance and rigor, which increases quality).

However, for example, no matter what happened in Food Dignity, the graduate students could still earn their degrees and my tenure track job that started in 2010 offered me seven more years of job security than any of the CBO positions had except for the sheriff at DDF. An academic can even do a case study about a CBO that dissolves or lets most staff go for lack of funding. The risks for academics were so minor compared to those for community-based partners, in this project and in life generally, that I prefer not to use the same word (risk) to describe them both.

the Food Dignity team has the elephant surrounded with three dozen or so co-investigators. Also, individual co-investigators always check their data and interpretations with relevant individuals and CBO leaders (member checking).

- *Theory triangulation*, i.e., viewing the data through various theoretical lenses. Here, I venture two related claims. One, Food Dignity is more a- and post-disciplinary than trans-disciplinary. The leadership from community-based co-investigators has led us to center our analysis around communities and people, as opposed to, for example, food or soil. Two, the lens variation among co-investigators has often been paradigmatic, in the Kuhnian sense of differing worldviews (Kuhn, 1962; Porter, Herrera, Marshall, & Woodsum, 2014). This is in addition to the array of discipline-specific theory and methods the academic co-investigators (whose disciplines are listed in the last row of Table 1) have brought to our case study and other research.
- *Methodological triangulation*, i.e., using a variety of methods in a study. The academic case study methods we have used include semi-structured coding of textual files, narrative inquiry with some interviews (Riessman, 1993; Riley & Hawe, 2005), collaborative pathway modelling (Hargraves & Denning, 2018), and institutional ethnography (Campbell & Gregor, 2004; D. E. Smith, 2005). Among academic-based investigators, we used auto-ethnography with technical approaches approximating Anderson's (2006), but always with ethical commitments mirroring Denzin's (2006). For examples from Food Dignity's work, see the graduate student reflective essay in this issue on emotional rigor (Bradley, Gregory, Armstrong, Arthur, & Porter, 2018), and (Porter et al., 2014; Wechsler, 2017).

In his *Research is Ceremony* guide to indigenous research methods, Wilson (2008) cites a friend who questions the idea of triangulation: "We came up with 'encircle'... And rather than it being valid or

reliable, I thought that maybe it's authentic or credible, and rather than focus on being reliable, it's relational. How it relates. So that's the test" (p.101). Striving for ethical and emotional rigor, in addition to epistemological, is a promising step towards this kind of relational credibility (Bradley et al., 2018).

Reflection and Conclusion

Food insecurity, racism, and other forms of social oppression, frayed community ties, food system unsustainability, and gross economic inequity are wicked and systemic social problems in the U.S. They are literally life and death problems, killing people with proximate causes such as gunshots, addictions, cancers, and complications of type II diabetes. In this context, the most relevant use of the word *rigor* is with *mortis*, not about research methods. Resolving these problems drives the work of food justice CBOs, and they do it by building on the expertise, relationships, and other assets in their communities (see, for example, nearly every other paper in this issue).

In spite of these costs and risks, the CBO leaders let the academic co-investigators learn with and from their work, and often actively taught and mentored academic partners. As with the Community and Regional Food Systems project (Ventura & Bailey, 2017, p. 3), these leaders were clear that they did not want to *be studied*, neither as individuals nor as organizations. In spite of all the risks, and the insufficient subaward funding, they were generously willing to share some of what they learned through decades of community organizing and food justice work and were willing *to study*, as co-investigators, in a cycle of funded action and reflection.

My experience as PI of Food Dignity leads me to hypothesize that the only chance of research contributing to CBOs resolving these problems is striving for ever-more-equitable community-university action research partnerships and ever-stronger relationships among collaborators ["bridge the distance between our cosmos and us" (Wilson, 2008, p. 137)]. I think this for at least two reasons. One is that community-based food justice activists will push academics to make resolving these problems the focus of their teaching, action,

and research. They certainly did in Food Dignity. The other reason is that people doing the work have knowledge, expertise, and relationships that are essential and irreplaceable for doing useful and rigorous action research about community food justice (or about any other community-based issue).

However, our community-university relationships in Food Dignity were never equitable. Following the guidance of our Food Dignity Values statement (Hargraves, 2018b), we did strive for ever greater equity. Six strategies we used for traveling that path together in a good way (Porter, 2016) included the following, with *summaries of their impacts in italics*:

1. Issuing subawards to each CBO and mostly paying these in advance, rather than arrears (Porter & Wechsler, 2018). This enabled the partnerships to form in the first place. Few of the CBOs could have afforded to be paid in arrears for the expenses incurred.
2. Investing financially and temporally in co-authorship with and first-person work by community-based co-investigators. Academics are otherwise the only ones who would be paid to do this work.
3. Investing heavily in spending in-person time together during seven national all-team meetings, plus smaller group working and socializing at a writing workshop, dozens of co-presentations at national conferences, and during site visits. This created and enacted our relationships and research collaborations.
4. Supporting a community-university liaison as a half-time position, who also worked as a co-investigator based at one of the five CBOs partnering in the project. Gayle Woodsum, also of FLV, took on this role in 2013. This was a first step in slightly reducing inequity between academic and community partners, including via having a CBO advocate and supporting community research more extensively. Woodsum also introduced the next two strategies.
5. Engaging an external facilitator for two of our national team meetings, Ms. Lila Cabbil.

Cabbil and Mr. Malik Yakini had previously facilitated anti-racism trainings at our meetings. I would not ever again host such meetings without a strong, external, community-centered and anti-racist facilitator to help reduce the community-academic and other power inequities during negotiations and discussions.

6. Organizing a pre-team-meeting community-partner-only retreat without academics in 2013, facilitated by Woodsum and Cabbil. People with less negotiating power at any given table benefit from having in-group time to deepen personal relationships and establish shared group priorities and strategies to help increase their power (see, for example, Cervero & Wilson, 2006).

Including for reasons described above, I believe these helped improve the equity of our partnership and depths of our inter-personal relationships which also, in turn, I think enriched the quality, quantity, and the epistemological and ethical rigor of our research. These two kinds of rigor are the first two “e”s of triple-e rigorous storytelling.


The seventh key to our collaboration on this case study research was the gift of substantial time and money—ultimately seven years and nearly US\$5 million. We needed this time not only to complete an enormous scope of work, but to learn to do it together. In the cliché-but-insightful framework for describing stages of group collaboration (Tuckman, 1965), we formed and then stormed—frequently and at times heavily—particularly through our second year. In our 2014 national meeting, a small working group developed what became our Food Dignity values statement, marking a turning point towards our most collaborative and productive time from then until the end of our funded time together in 2016. We also were given the national Community-Campus Partnerships for Health award in 2014, a recognition of action-research collaborations striving for equity within their partnerships and in public health outcomes.

An eighth factor has been my excruciating, transformative, and love-infused labors to learn

how to lead and how to follow with personal and academic humility, and the similar work of other academics who have attempted this path with me. This is a journey that I will explore in future writing, and one in which the CBO co-investigators were my guides, mentors, and teachers. (To avoid sounding too romantic about this, I will add that I often verbally characterize some of this guidance as “schooling me” and “slapping me upside the head.” We shared lots of love, but little romance.) This depth of engaged emotion is the third “e” of the triple rigor in rigorous storytelling. As Wilson (2008) cites a friend saying, “If research doesn’t change you as a person, then you aren’t doing it right” (p. 83).

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The ninth, and turnkey, factor is the generosity, courage, and ferocious dedication to justice of the community-based coinvestigators in Food Dignity. They were doing the work before this project, and continue to afterwards. At risk of delaying or even derailing their journeys towards food justice, they tolerated or even embraced academic outsiders in following them down some of this road—the one they are making by walking. 

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