Power of the People: The Impact of Food Culture in Ontario, California on Creating a Healthy Community and Sustaining a Community Garden

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Welcome to Huerta del Valle:

Introduction

I became involved with the Huerta del Valle community garden project through the Pitzer in Ontario (PIO) Program. As a growing social justice activist, my interest in PIO was applying both personal experience and academic knowledge into community engagement and empowerment. My involvement with children and young adults from experiences including: being an art teacher assistant at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago; serving as a volunteer for physical and occupational therapists at the Rehabilitation Institute of Chicago; interning with the Teenagers Exploring and Explaining Nature and Science (TEENS) Program at the Peggy Notebaert Nature Museum; and my current role as mentor for Uncommon Good’s Teen Green Program, is one of the reasons that inspired me to become active in the Huerta del Valle project.

I recognized the importance of my ethnicity within the community of Ontario, California; I grew up on the Southside of Chicago in a Hispanic populated neighborhood. Not to mention that I am Mexican-American. I would eventually recognize the importance of my race between community members and between current Huerta del Valle members. As a junior Environmental Analysis Major with a focus on Sustainability and the Built Environment, my academic courses in college have centered on environmental design and sustainability with a focus on “just sustainability” and community engagement. On Pomona College’s campus, the discourse of food justice is envisioned as a primary social justice critique among the dominant white student body. This is perceived through organizations including Pomona for Environmental Justice and Responsibility (PEAR) and sustainability programs initiated through Pomona Dining Services. My involvement with the Huerta del Valle project evolved from interest in learning more about why there was popular discussion on food justice activism.
My research project analyzes local food justice through the perspective of community members in Ontario, California. The Huerta del Valle community garden project has a history of involvement with other garden projects initiated by other organizations including Second Chances, and sites including Linda Vista and New Frontier in Ontario, CA. The Huerta del Valle community garden project’s objective has changed because of these experiences with past community garden projects. Where Huerta del Valle was working in conjunction with existing organizations in the past, Huerta del Valle is in the process of starting a community garden from the ground up. From working with the city to obtain the land to working with lawyers in discussion of incorporating Huerta del Valle into a non-profit organization after three years, the question of feasibility of the project is brought up. Not only does incorporation raise issues regarding the sustainability of the project, but it also raises questions about the infrastructure of the City of Ontario including food access and social structure including community engagement and food culture.

Working with Shannon Leap, a sophomore Pitzer student involved with PIO, our collaborative research project focuses on the perceptions of food access and culture within Ontario, California. In addition, our research project analyzes perceptions on the relationship between health and food, and works to understand not only how this defines the food culture among community members, but the efficacy and sustainability of the Huerta del Valle community garden project. My level of community engagement found myself primarily at the Ontario House attending regular meetings with the committee of Huerta del Valle members to discuss planning processes. Another part of my work included several visits to Martha’s house, the Ovitt Family Community Library, and City Hall throughout the semester. On numerous occasions, I found myself riding my bike to Ontario, CA from Claremont, CA. These personal
experiences have allowed me to develop a working understanding of the space that I have engaged myself in, and contextualize an existing social culture among community members in Ontario, CA.

The amount of literature discussing the sociology behind food culture is extensive. The discourse on food justice, however, is just as extensive, and there are a variety of issues I could have focused my research paper. From my review of field notes and interview transcriptions, I have been able to focus on the more specific issue of the creation of food culture within the context of definitive food access constraints. My review of literature focuses on food culture as a function of the relationship and structure between individual choice and behavior, and systemic public policy. My review of literature creates the historical background of food’s importance to American society, and its impact on daily life including its integration with health. This developing relationship between health and food is integral to visualizing the possibility of the sustainability of the community garden project. In addition, the developing information from literature lays the underlying foundation for understanding the food culture in Ontario, CA. With an understanding of the different perceptions of food access between government and individual communities, the concluding food culture allows for public policy to be shaped around the community’s needs. This distinction between perceptions among community members and government officials is important to understanding the relationship between community and public policy.
The Rhetoric of Food Discourse: Systemic vs. Individual Responsibility

Literature Review

Both personal observation notes and researched literature discuss the rhetoric on health within the paradigm of food justice. The discourse on living a healthy lifestyle and eating healthy challenges the level of responsibility between individuals and communities versus local government and policy. This theory of spatiality expanding beyond individual responsibility and stretching into public policy is prevalent in this food justice discourse. For example, supermarket redlining is important in understanding the localized relationship in Ontario, California between families and city officials. Supermarket redlining affects cities like Ontario, California.

Elizabeth Eisenhauer, through her writing “In poor health: Supermarket redlining and urban nutrition”, discusses how urban growth, migration patterns, and spatiality create a structure of access to supermarkets. Supermarkets symbolize a city’s food accessibility and overall food culture. Supermarkets offer greater variety, fresher produce, and more reasonable prices compared to smaller corner and liquor stores. Eisenhauer discusses that urban health is directly related to urban history. Eisenhaur explains that a history of urban growth is the reason for supermarket redlining in specific locations.

Supermarkets serve as symbols of health and nutrition in a community, and if a community does not have a supermarket, patterns of decreased nutrition and other health problems increase. As a geographer, Eisenhauer’s focus is on geographic isolation. Urban growth causes affluent white neighborhoods and poor communities of color. Although supermarkets are present in predominately populated minority communities, the type of produce sold, the quality of produce sold, and the pricing is different. Even among specific communities, the produce is sold differently between different supermarkets. The limited number and disparity
of supermarkets in communities of color creates food deserts, areas where there is limited to no access to fresh or healthy food. Spatiality is important to understanding the physical disparity, but also the sociological differences in perspective on food access. These geographic differences cause the resulting food culture.

For the case of Ontario, California, a combination of white flight and Hispanic immigration patterns have changed and shaped the current demographics of the city. In addition, the economic situation has created the current lack of supermarkets and grocery stores with fresh healthy fruits and vegetables. These geographic differences have shaped the different communities within Ontario and as a result, different food cultures. These different food cultures are partly caused by distance; they are also caused by interactions with surrounding community members. I conclude that there is a responsibility between both individuals and city leaders to address and change the health concerns of their community. By understanding the differences in perspectives and more definitive elements, the discourse in food access within the City of Ontario, California can be addressed.

The Huerta del Valle community garden project is working on implementing a community garden, not a grocery store. Efforts are being made by the project to work with a local corner store to provide the community with access to fruits and vegetables. But regardless of the project or objective, the community garden project’s goal is provide a resource for communities to meet together, work together, and obtain fresh fruits and vegetables. The mission is to change the access to healthy fruits and vegetables, and reach the goal of creating community empowerment, sustainability, and better health. By understanding how to divide responsibility between individual action and public policy change, we will be able to gain a vision for what needs to be changed.
Cultural discourses and power hierarchies influence popular perceptions of healthy food. In *Let’s Move: The Ideological Constraints of Liberalism on Michelle Obama’s Rhetoric*, Abigail Seiler discusses two competing discourses regarding rising obesity rates and unhealthy eating habits in the United States: individual behavior modification and personal habits, and systemic prevention and environmental determinants (Seiler 2012: 205). Seiler argues that the rhetoric of food is defined not only at the level of individual responsibility, but also at the level of governmental policy. Seiler summarizes the literature on food with particular attention to the rise in obesity rates and “unhealthy eating habits” in the United States. Many authors cite an “obesity epidemic” in America that is caused by a nutritional gap between rich and poor. This gap saddles impoverished people with poor food choices, flooding neighborhoods with convenience stores and fast food establishments (Seiler 2012: 156; x; x; x;).

Seiler’s argument is that notions of food availability are laden by social assumptions that ignore the political dimensions of the problem. Referencing Foucault, she writes, “…contemporary discourses surrounding healthy eating are constituted through the formation of truth born out of the historically rooted and mutually producing relationship between language and power” (157).

For the remainder of this review, I will examine the discourses Seiler refers to—individual choice vs. social inequality—in order to set the stage for my paper’s examination of the Huerta del Valle’s vision of different perceptions of access of food culture and how it will impact the sustainability of the community garden. I will review models that unpack the linkages between individual choice and structural constraint through the examination of rhetoric in just the way the Seiler proposes (Seiler; x; x; x; x;).

Body of paper: summarizing a few pieces from that literature.
Sei-Hill Kim and Anne Willis, in *Talking about Obesity: News Framing of Who is Responsible for Causing and Fixing the Problem*, state that the way media frames obesity and an unhealthy diet places the burden of responsibility on the individual (as cited in Seiler 167).

In *Food, Health, and Well-Being: Positioning Functional Foods*, Alison Henderson and Vanessa Johnson explain the growing rhetoric of functional foods, and their role in food production and consumerism, and confusing consumers on what to buy, what does healthy mean, and accessibility, but also the muddled symbolism in how functional foods affects the culture of people in local areas.

My research project is focused on understanding the definitions and perceptions of food access and culture within the city of Ontario, CA, and their effects on the sustainability of the community garden project. Understanding the dialogue about food will enable us to visualize the food culture of Ontario, CA, and enable us to understand the rhetoric that is being described and understood among community members. Among the many issues within the City of Ontario, community members recognize a high rate in obesity patterns through diabetic or pre-diabetic family members and relatives. To community members, they understand the connection between diabetes and living an unhealthy lifestyle, whether that is availability of healthy food.
Conducting Research:

Methods and Methodologies

I employed participatory action research to follow one of the missions for the community garden project, community empowerment. By questioning authority, and engaging community members in discussion, I acknowledge the importance of their direct experience with the community in which I am working and supporting. Through narrative inquiry, my partner and I have been able to collect recorded interviews of both community members and city officials, and their responses to questions on health, food, and the community garden project. Throughout the semester, I engaged in participatory observation. As I was given the responsibility of creating and organizing the agenda for each weekly meeting, my field notes have taken the form of minute-style note-taking format.

Engaging Positionality and Experience

There are times in my life when I am challenged by what I know are happening, and what I think may be happening. During my semester conducting my research, I have been challenged by my increasing knowledge about white privilege. My awareness of white privilege, however, has become both a burden of separation among members, yet an understanding on the importance of my presence within the community. The more I am conscious of the ideology of white privilege, the more I apply this ideology to everyday experience. It is a double-edged sword.

Historically, white privilege has transformed over time, but it is always present. As the only student of color in the Pitzer in Ontario program this semester who is not only Mexican – American, but speaks and understands a decent amount of Spanish, I recognized my position of
authority and experience, and my position in face of racism and oppression. The City of Ontario, California has a large Hispanic population, and I can say that my experience has been one of acceptance. As a student of color, growing up in a primarily poor working class neighborhood, and working in a community that shares similar demographics, my experience is unique and offers personal insight. With this insight, my analysis of my field work and interviews is connected to personal experiences back home in Chicago, Illinois.

I would like to indicate that I recognize my positionality as a student of color within the context of this community garden project. I understand the importance of presence within meetings and among the community. I should indicate that I have reluctantly voiced my thoughts: creating a safe-space meeting and working environment, being cognizant of our individual and collective positionality, and slowing down progress in the face of differences in perspective. Unfortunately, my efforts to share these personal insights have gone without further regard directly. Fortunately, as progress has been made, my sharing of insight has appeared to make members more cognizant of decisions that are made including noticing white privilege, creating safe-space, fostering effective communication, focusing on a collective objective, and recognizing individual contributions. It is for these reasons why I not only acknowledge my positionality as a student, but encourage students of color involved in this project to take advantage of personal experiences. This project is itself an intrusive project, making assumptions based on preexisting, specific evidence, but at the same time, decisions are made based on voiced perspectives. And if individual voice is not at least projected, your involvement with this project is not as involved as you might think. I implore you to be conscious of white privilege, but at the same token, do not visualize it as a barrier. Rather, see it as an opportunity to empower the community you are working with.
Understanding Food Culture in Ontario, California:

**Discussion**

Through interviews with community members and city officials, along with hours of engagement within the community and personal observation notes, five distinct themes serve as the basis for understanding the food culture of Ontario, California, the perceptions of food access, and the sustainability of the garden. These five themes include: public policy and community expectations (systemic association of responsibility), redlining of supermarkets (food access and food culture), education of youth and family (systemic and community association of responsibility), community organizing (individual and collective responsibility), and sustainability of the community garden (changing individual and systemic responsibility).

Through my literature review on rhetoric of food, sociology between food and culture, and the connection between food and health, I link global theory to local community action. My personal experience and field work together with literature shed light on the real concerns of the community members and possible solutions for solving these concerns. In addition, I discuss these concerns in regards to the efficacy and sustainability of the community garden project.

*Experiment in Action: Community Expectations in Public Policy and Politics*

Kaiser Permanente recognizes a given section of land known as the HEAL Zone in Ontario, California as one that is in need of improvements in the health of the community. Through the City of Ontario’s Healthy Ontario initiative, a Kaiser grant was provided to the city to distribute to different organizations to provide programs to address specific issues pertaining to health within the City of Ontario. Huerta del Valle is one of those projects, but the grant is expected to last only three years. Based on my interviews with city officials and meetings
throughout the semester, the expectations of community members and for the community garden project are apparent.

According to meetings with city officials, the efficacy and sustainability of the community garden is not expected to last longer than the three years. The expectation, however, is that community members will become more organized and will develop the support to continue the community garden project and sustain a level of communication among community members to engage the city in addressing specific needs of the community. These expectations are in part response to Huerta del Valle’s intentions on becoming a non-profit in the future. In one meeting, for instance, one city official indicated at the end of our meeting, “Things don’t last forever.” And on several occasions, our meetings with city officials have resulted in the clarification of our vision and goals for the sustainability of the community garden. Their doubt begins with community organizing. Meetings have revealed that through initiatives such as the developing leaders within the community through community organizing, people like Martha can serve as foundational platforms for public policy change.

The apparent politics, however, reveal different intentions. During meetings, it is apparent that our goals are somewhat separate from that of the city. For example, we are still in the process of obtaining rights to use the land. Initially, we were fighting to obtain rights to lease the land, but because it is part of the city, and because they might want to use it for something else, we are now fighting for rights to use the land. In other instances, it is apparent that our mission may supersede the minimal expectations from the city. For example, in an interview with city officials, it was made clear that when it comes to food choice and choosing to live a healthy lifestyle, it is the individual’s responsibility. More specifically, the education aspect
comes at home between the interactions between parents and children. The city’s position on responsibility is centered on communal interactions and individual lifestyle.

The politics behind this experiment in action is also apparent. In our interview, city officials informed us that regardless of the outcome of this community garden project, the rate of success within their city on community organizing and increasing the health of the city affects the regional relationships they are able to develop with surrounding cities. If the community of Ontario succeeds, other cities will be able to learn from the experience of Ontario, California.

Developing community leaders is a great objective, and developing partnerships with other cities does not sound completely farfetched, but I cannot but help feel concerned that obvious politics are at play within the City of Ontario, CA.

*Grocery Shopping and the Kitchen: Redlining Food Access*

Grocery shopping is much more than going to the store and buying whatever you are looking for, it is a process. I find myself always inspecting lettuce leaves for discoloration, checking for bruises on apples and pears, squeezing and looking for ripeness in avocados and bananas, checking the expiration date on milk and bread, and making sure I am specific when it comes to requesting how many pounds of cheese, cold cuts, or meats. I have learned these tricks of the trade from my mom. For instance, I have learned that the fresh fruit is always towards the top and back of the pile of fruit. There is a reason for this: because grocery stores need to get rid of rotting fruit, and because Mexicans are stereotypically shorter than other races, grocery stores can always have a balanced mix of fresh fruit for those who are more determined to reach for the fresh fruit from the top of the bunch, while those who don’t care as much can have their share from the bottom of the bunch. Although I would not be surprised by this theory, I do not see this
whenever I shop at a grocery store. Whenever I go to Pete’s Market for example, I always see workers picking up fallen, bruised, and squashed nectarines and throwing them into an empty brown box. Or, every now and then, workers are shuffling through tomatoes and throwing away ones that a compost pile would love to decompose. However, I always bring these “fresh” fruits and vegetables back, only to realize that the limes never got used for a carne asada dinner, the bananas are always spotted black, or the cucumbers in the bottom drawer of our refrigerator are covered in fuzzy mold, and have leaked liquid that now forms of large puddle. Nonetheless, there is a process when it comes to grocery shopping, let along the kitchen table.

The selection process is where individual choice provides customers with the upper-hand. There is choice when it comes to: the supermarket, the types of foods, the quality of foods, the price of foods, the expiration of foods, the bagging of foods, the storing of food, the preparation of food, and finally, the consumption of food. When it comes to availability, for my neighborhood in Chicago, there is a wide selection of fruits and vegetables. Accessing the different prices and quality is maybe a bit more challenging. For my family, this includes taking public transportation. And with public transportation in Chicago follows time management. So, I always find myself on the weekends waking up to find my mom has a circled list of a specific number of fruits and vegetables that are on sale. Then, I have to check the time table for when the next bus is going to arrive to take me to the store that has those items on sale. The whole grocery shopping process takes about two hours. Because, did I forget, I am usually running other errands in addition to grocery shopping. But that is another issue.

My time with Martha has revealed similarities in thinking, mother to mother, culture to culture. After waking up one morning to head over to Martha’s house, I found myself biking down Euclid and experiencing almost a temporal shift. I found myself starting off biking down
paved sidewalks alongside single family household, two-floor homes and ending up on broken, pebble-ridden sidewalks alongside empty lots, run-down homes, liquor convenience stores. Then I reached Martha’s home, a mobile trailer home within an equally dispersed network of possibly more than one hundred mobile homes. After being greeted with a hug and offered something to eat, she informed me that she needed to return a 3D HD DVD player that did not work. Afterwards, we would visit two grocery markets, Cardenas and Super King. Throughout most of my time with Martha, I found myself distracted with Pablo. I found that he either was showing me something or going off and showing me something. Because Martha was focused on the tasks at hand, I found it my responsibility to serve as a one-day guardian over Pablo. So, when it came down to finding out about the amount of money Martha spent at either store, or some of the different items she bought, I found myself wanting to know more.

Our first destination was Super King in Claremont, California. After returning the DVD player in Industry, California, we travelled the I-10 to Super King. As Martha found a parking space at the end of the lot, I could not help but notice the large dispersed customers rolling shopping carts into and out of the supermarket. It was almost a continuous, non-ending cycle: a customer goes in with an empty shopping cart, a customer comes out with at least five bags of plastic shopping bags. You don’t see this activity at a local corner store. Conveniently, this supermarket was right off the I-10, so there is no trouble for anyone heading back home after work to make a quick stop at this supermarket to pick up some meat or fruits and vegetables. In addition, there are about several other fast-food places in the surrounding area, just in case you wasted more than enough time shopping for grocery items, and want to grab a quick meal at the nearby In-N-Out or Burger King (which for some odd reason sit next to each other).
As we entered the store, Martha asked me in Spanish, “What do you see?” I wanted to say, “A lot of people”, but I knew she was asking me questions about the produce and prices of each item. But I would like to point out the importance of my response. At any grocery store supermarket, there is always a large group of people shopping. They are either mothers with their active children, care-free grandmothers, or lost fathers; in our case, a mother and her son with what could be her older son who is in college. In fact, I would like to note that whenever Martha has introduced me to people she knows, she has always referred to me as a student from Pitzer who is practicing Spanish. It was not only until more recently, after the house meeting and door knocking that she referred to me as a student helping with the garden project, which just happened to be to an old lady who was carrying a paint bucket filled with corn husks or some other type of foliage. Returning back to my grocery shopping experience, shopping carts filled the small aisles between each island of produce. This clustered traffic jam made the whole experience bewildering as I was trying to keep an eye on Pablo who was heading back and forth between his mom and an assortment of candies while avoiding bumping into shopping carts and noticing the types of produce, the price of produce, and the quality of the produce. I will note that price shopping has never been my forte, so I felt bad when the first thing Martha would ask me afterwards was, “what about the prices? Do you notice anything different between here and over there?” I happened to take note of something that I would see anywhere, the price of limes. Unfortunately, limes are usually very cheap, and so the difference isn’t that big between supermarkets, but I did happen to notice the amount you were able to buy, and there was a slight increase at Super King than there was at Cardenas. Before leaving each store, I grabbed the supermarket paper, hoping to compare prices, but just like any other, I lost them.
Martha ended up buying her son those sugared orange slices he kept begging his mother to buy him, and after not really paying attention to what specifically he wanted, she was upset with his decision afterwards to the point where she almost did not buy them. The difference between Cardenas and Super King, I noticed from the start was the entrance and the first items you are able to visualize. At Cardenas, it is pastries while at Super King, it is spices. The other visual is greens, but compared to Super King, I noticed that Cardenas had cheaper quality than Super King. I even noticed something that I did not expect to see at both locations, Pomegranate, but at Cardenas, the Pomegranates were smaller and were marked of expiration. As are most people I noticed shopping, we did not go down any of the larger aisles that sold canned, processed food. This is an interesting fact; I noticed the same phenomena when I went grocery shopping with my mom. People will shop around the center of the grocery store, not through the aisles in the center. Customers hug the outer edge of supermarkets where there are more available fresh products such as meats, cheeses, fish, breads, and fruits and vegetables. However, there is a difference between a corporate owned supermarkets such as a Jewel or Trader Joe’s which is usually found in white affluent neighborhoods versus a supermarket that is primarily shopped by Hispanics such as Cardenas or Pete’s Fresh Market. I cannot reason this theory as this was not the focus of my project, but it would be interesting to note the differences in availability between supermarkets, small grocery stores, and corner stores. It is interesting to note that even now, former corporate stores who once did not sell anything fresh, are selling produce. This includes Target and Wal-Mart.

There is a food culture. This food culture is dependent on food access. As I have noted, food access does not rely necessarily on distance between a corner store and a supermarket. If you have a car, this ideology of spatiality affecting the choices that people becomes negligent if
there is a separation between convenience and time. If there is time, families will make the effort to shop for fresh produce that is affordable and is specific to their families’ meals. But if there isn’t time, distance is taken into account. Unfortunately, time is usually a factor for most families. The whole day with Martha was spent outside the house grocery shopping. This is interesting because even for my family who doesn’t own a car, it takes us about the same, sometimes more, amount of time to buy groceries. It is usually a whole day thing. But if there is time, the family will make an effort to shop somewhere that is affordable, where the quality is better, and where the quantity and diversity is greater. I mentioned before that the people that tend to go grocery shopping are mothers with their children. My experience between Martha and her son demanding candy is a small example of a larger issue that follows us back to the household. This household experience is what happens after the process of buying the groceries; it is the experience of preparing and cooking a meal, and having to deal with individual personal choices.

Community at Risk: Educating Youth and Family on Health

Go to any corner store in my neighborhood back home, actually, just go outside right after kids get out of school, and you will notice children in my neighborhood snacking away on Hot Cheetos. The corner stores always stock up on bags of potato chips (if you can even call them potato chips anymore), but the demand for them is so great, that there is usually very few of the popular chip brands available. You just have to take one look at my large, fenced backyard. My family lives on the corner house, right at the intersection, the worst place to live in the ghetto. My mom says, “If you ever have a house of your own, don’t live on the corner.” She’s right. My backyard serves as an eddy, filled with random items but mostly potato chip bags. The
intersection of any non-major street in the hood is always the center for midnight gang activity, invisible car accidents and speeding past a stop sign, or opening up a fire hydrant in the dead heat of summer. But the main point are the signs of declining health among young children. My mom always complains to us about another 3 year old child sitting across from her on the bus looking dumbfounded eating a bag of Doritos. Like my mom, I have become disgusted. To think that for many families, a bag of chips is a snack for their young child. I have not noticed this trend in Ontario, California, but then again, I haven’t been in the community long enough to understand the real problem behind the high obesity rate in teens and young adults, the growing trend of mothers like Martha who are concerned about the weight and health of their children, but do not how to go about solving this puzzle.

Like I have heard from city officials at Ontario, California, the issue seems to be education, but at what level? Is it the school, or are the parents? My interviews with both city officials and community members reveal a similarity in the change in childhood rearing. The people we interviewed were middle-aged parents with children of their own. In each case, the person interviewed talks about the difference in how they were raised when they were younger, and how they are raising their children now. Each of the people interviewed identified a need for better education of children. For city officials, this was the school, but when questioned further, the education that seemed to be of concern was between parents and their children. For community members, education to youth about health concerns involves both parents and the community support. It is important to note the highly singles-sided perspective of health being part of individual responsibility instead of recognizing systemic responsibility. Community members do not express concern that the city should not play a larger role within the education of the community; in fact, it is quite the opposite. Local government should provide more
programs that are more accessible to everyone within the community. Supermarkets should not be redlined. And education on health should be at the forefront of education. But it is more than knowledge; it is also showing by example. As with Martha, her inspiration to change the health of her family and her community stems from being a role model for her children. It is acknowledging that community empowerment and the creation of leaders is at the forefront of tackling issues pertaining to change in health disparity among the community. This requires the support from the community to not only acknowledge this health disparity, but address and become active members.

*Organizing for Change: Creating and Sustaining Community*

The majority of our time throughout the semester focused on logistical components to the creation of the community garden including obtaining rights to the land, and even obtaining the go-ahead to reach out into the community regarding the community garden project. Our hesitancy as researchers to engage with the community at this essential level was blocked by the progress made on logistics, so it was important that we focus on these issues that proved to be more pertinent. However, it is important that we engaged with the community at the time that we did because the efficacy and sustainability of this community garden project is dependent on community commitment and communication.

The two major action plans we initiated as a group were a house meeting and door knocking. The house meeting at a dedicated community member’s house proved to be essential for organizing existing community members who have expressed strong interest with the community garden project. The following team door knocking community action plan provided other community members who may not have known about the garden with information about how then can become involved and create awareness about the objective of addressing specific
health concerns within the community. Our response was great! Everyone who filled out a two question questionnaire answered ‘yes’ to the question regarding attending monthly meetings to discuss the garden project. In addition, we asked community members on a scale of 1 to 10, what would they rate the efficacy of the proposed community garden project, and almost everyone scored between a 7 and 10. No one scored below a 5, and there was only one person that gave it a score of 5.

Before this, there were smaller initiatives to attract attention for the community garden project where we obtained contact information for some attendants at the 7th Annual Health and Wellness Fair in Ontario, California. The Health and Wellness Fair was important because it was our first time presenting our project to the community. Unfortunately, we were over sighted by many due to lack of interest by children. The Fair’s use of a stamp to head to specific locations only to find that our booth did not have a stamp left children absent minded on what each booth represented, and focused on the final prize. Believe me, if I was told that there was a prize for obtaining a stamp, I would have only visited the ones that had stamps, and would have not cared about the other booths. This is what happened.

It is obvious, however, to note the correlation between this experience and with our interviews in educating the youth in Ontario about health concerns. Youth begins with parents showing their children that health is important. This is part one of the education process. The other part is providing the services, programs, and events such as these to educate youth at a different level. These two important factors assist in developing the essential knowledge for not only youth to become involved, but all community members, families included.
The vision for Huerta del Valle is specific: as one of the first community garden’s in Ontario, California, this community garden project works with community to create community empowerment, provide access to healthy food, and provide an environment for the discussion and education of health concerns within the community. The extent of who this project intends to reach out to is also very specific. This project hopes to identify leaders. These community leaders will help sustain and maintain the community garden. Through community organizing, these leaders can work to address local health concerns, and gain support for the garden project.

This project is intended for the whole community, but the community needs to engage in better communication, better acknowledgement of one another and better understanding of the issues so as to work effectively in changing the public policy needed to affect real change. Our creation of flyers will help the community members working on the ground to relay the message of the garden and gain support. By engaging in dialogue, a conversation is started about an important concern that affects everyone. By identifying the specific location, the specific reason for localization, community members will begin to understand the importance of this community garden and its objectives. If the Huerta del Valle community garden project is to develop into a non-profit, then there needs to be a stable ground of community involvement and interaction. And as city officials have indicated, if they are able to see change among community members in understanding their resources, their rights, and their support, the sustainability of this project will not go in vain.
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Conclusion

Months working with the Huerta del Valle community garden project do not compare to the years the Pitzer in Ontario program has been involved with this project. It was important during one meeting; discussion updated me and Shannon on previous projects. I brought up this focus group because if we are able to understand the past experience of the garden project, we can be prepared to tackle similar challenges with this new initiative. The difference between the past Huerta del Valle internships and now is that we are working from the ground up. In the past, Huerta del Valle has worked with existing garden projects in Ontario, but this semester is the first semester where Huerta del Valle was working on obtaining the land, obtaining funding, and working with community to create a sustainable community garden. An understanding of history is important to understanding the development of a community or a group of people and essential to finding the resources available to the community. The resulting social, physical, and political landscape is important to creating a more viable objective, developing stronger communication, and more effective policy change that works with the community.

Our research on perceptions of food culture reveals that there are many similarities in how to approach changing the health of the community. Community members and city officials share similar perspectives that it is individual choice that results in healthy lifestyle. This is the beginning step for responsibility; it does not start and end with community. In fact, improvement in community health is also part of the systemic responsibility towards effective public policy change, resources, and communication. But in order to get to an effective level of communication with the city, there needs to be an organized community. With effective community leaders, individuals and families are able to educate each other, look out for each
other, talk to each other on a level to recognize the health disparity within their community, and works to serve as a role model for youth in the area.

Youth are at risk, but education and serving as a role model can assist with changing unhealthy food choices, and becoming more active. This form of education can be served by the community garden through workshops. More importantly, it is the continuation into the household that serves as stronger communication and bonding between family members. By doing so, the process of grocery shopping can become more effective. A better conscious of what is happening is useful for communicating the need for change. If community members recognize a disparity between grocery stores, this is an economic and health concern within the community. The more aware people become of their health, the more active they can become in transforming it and have control over their lives.

It is essential that the link between community and city become connected. The differences reveal disconnection. If the community becomes more involved with themselves, with their community, and with their city, effective public policy change can happen. The sustainability of the community garden project is dependent on the community’s level of involvement, and continuation with the spread of information to others. The community garden project serves as a resource to begin this change within the community by finding leaders, understanding skills, educating others, communicating effectively, and establishing the base of needs of all the community and solutions to these concerns.
Planting the Seed:

References


