

Symposium: Beliefs, Power and the State of Nutrition: Integrating Social Science Perspectives in Nutrition Interventions

Participation, Power and Beliefs Shape Local Food and Nutrition Policy¹

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ABSTRACT Community participation is believed to hold a number of benefits, including the incorporation of local knowledge in planning, generation of greater support for and sustainability of local actions and being consistent with democratic values. These claimed benefits were examined in upstate New York, where 3-d participatory planning events were convened in each of six communities, focusing on desired changes in the local food system. A variety of qualitative and quantitative methods were used to assess the following: 1) local values, interests and beliefs (viewpoints) related to food and the food system before and after the planning events; 2) fairness and effectiveness in agenda setting; and 3) implementation of actions during the 2 y following the events. Despite marked variation in viewpoints, participants readily agreed on desired changes in the local food system during the events and they considered the process to be a fair and positive experience. However, the action agendas, follow-up actions and changes in viewpoints after the events displayed systematic tendencies to deviate from revealed common interests or interests of disenfranchised participants. This reflected differences in the fairness and effectiveness of participation during and after the events, established agendas and preferences of local institutions and a variety of market and regulatory barriers. *J. Nutr.* 133: 301S–304S, 2003.

KEY WORDS: • *community food security* • *public nutrition* • *democracy* • *devolution*

Interventions, programs, policies and other actions to improve nutrition always have taken place within a social context. However, key elements of this social context, that is, the nature and distribution of power and beliefs at the societal level, have been undergoing particularly rapid and dramatic changes in recent decades (Table 1). This report describes the key results from an empirical study in upstate New York designed to respond to some of these shifts and to learn from this experience. The report is written primarily with the U.S. situation in mind, but many of the issues are relevant to other countries as well.

The North Country Food and Economic Security Project was initiated in 1996 at a time when all of these shifts were readily discernible and discussed in various academic and policy communities. What was not clear at the time was how

the practice of public nutrition³ (or public administration more broadly) might best respond to these changes. Some of the salient questions for public nutrition in upstate New York at the time were as follows:

- In light of welfare reform and devolution unfolding at the time, how salient are the concerns of disenfranchised⁴ people in poor rural communities?
- Could the local attention to nutrition issues be heightened by integrating them with more salient local issues related to health, agriculture and economic development?
- If communities are to play a greater role in identifying and addressing their priority problems and concerns, what types of participation and decision-making processes might be most useful and how might they be evaluated in terms of stimulating action, promoting democratic decision making and having greater sustainability?

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³ Public nutrition is concerned with nutrition-related problems at the population level and actions that extend beyond the health sector, including those related to economic, agricultural and education sectors (1).

⁴ Use of the term "disenfranchised" has been defined in this research as the denying of a privilege, freedom or power to a person or group, resulting in a limited ability to actively and freely participate in society.

TABLE 1

Key shifts in power and beliefs affecting public nutrition, since circa 1980

METHODS

To examine these and other questions an “action research project” was designed in which Cornell faculty and staff partnered with agencies in local communities in the design, implementation and evaluation of a promising participatory approach to community planning and priority setting. The North Country Project was initiated in six northern counties of New York to test alternative models for community decision making related to food and nutrition (2).

The search conference was used as a decision-making model in this study, representing one example of a strategic visioning and planning approach for use in organizations and communities (3). Briefly, it involved 30–50 local participants who identified goals and objectives through small and large group discussions over 2 to 3 d in six separate counties. The six search conferences were attended by a total of 240 people, of whom 69% were female, 56% were 40–60 y of age, 56% had a college degree, 23% were employed in the food or agricultural industry and 19% were consumers. Table 2 summarizes the key research questions and methods used. One set of questions relates to the salience of various values, interests and beliefs concerning the food system and the extent to which these changed after the search conferences. A second set relates to the effectiveness of the search conferences in stimulating decisions and actions, the nature of the priorities revealed in the action plans, the sustainability of actions and priorities agreed upon at the conferences and the compatibility between state and local agendas. A third set of questions relates to the roles of power and participation before, during and after the search conferences. Methods included a wide variety of observations, records and interviews from various stages of the project.

RESULTS

Salience. Three distinct viewpoints were revealed by Q methodology (4). Factor A, or Social Justice Advocates, are very concerned about the social welfare of low income people in their communities, especially in light of welfare reform, but do not consider local agriculture or environmental problems in agriculture to be a salient concern. Factor B, or Pragmatists, are unsympathetic toward social welfare issues, in large part because they consider it a matter of personal responsibility. They view agriculture as a very important part of the community, and they do not consider environmental consequences of agriculture to be a major concern. Factor C, or Visionaries, are mildly sympathetic toward social welfare concerns, strongly supportive of local agriculture and consider the environmental consequences of the mainstream U.S. food system to be a highly salient concern. They would like to see a more local and environmentally friendly form of agriculture evolve in the United States. These findings confirm that some of the diverse values associated with the community food security (CFS)

movement are salient among these participants, although not all participants simultaneously embrace all the CFS values.

Comparison of pre- and postconference Q results revealed that the salience of Social Welfare viewpoint and the Visionary viewpoint was significantly *lower* after the conferences. By contrast, the salience of the Pragmatist viewpoint remained strong among the original Pragmatists and showed a significant increase among the original Visionaries and the nonloaders. There was an 88% increase in the number of people loading significantly on the Pragmatist factor ($n = 49$ vs. $n = 26$) and a decrease in the number of people in the other two categories. Thus, it appears that participation in the search conferences is associated with significant changes in viewpoint concerning the food system, although the direction of these changes was unexpected.

Effectiveness, sustainability and compatibility of actions.

The discussions during the conferences consistently revealed deep concerns about the nature of the changes taking place in the national food system, the loss of economic vitality and social connectedness in the local and regional food systems and other social and economic changes in the county and North Country region. The action plans revealed a consistent interest in retaining, strengthening and/or relocalizing many aspects of the food system, thereby confirming the salience of many of the values, interests and beliefs expressed within the CFS movement.

The primary indicators of the effectiveness of the search conferences in stimulating new decisions and sustaining actions are based on the voluntary decisions and actions of participants during and after the conferences. According to project records, 194 of the 240 participants “signed up” for at least one of the 34 working groups formed at the conference (2); 27 of the 34 working groups met at least once after the conferences to refine their action plans and begin implementing their actions; 42 representatives of 22 of the working groups attended a multicounty conference in Albany, NY

TABLE 2

Summary of research questions and methods

| Research question | Methods |
|--|---|
| Salient values, interests and beliefs (viewpoints): | |
| 1. What are the salient issues and viewpoints? | Q meth; Action Plans; Implementation |
| 2. Are the CFS values salient? | Q meth; Action Plans; Implementation |
| 3. Do viewpoints change after a Search Conference? | Q meth, pre/post |
| Action: | |
| 4. Effectiveness in stimulating decisions and actions? | Action Plans; Implementation |
| 5. Sustainability of action? | 12- to 18-mo follow-up interviews |
| 6. Agenda compatibility: state vs. local | 12- to 18-mo follow-up interviews |
| Participation, power and democracy: | |
| 7. Is decision making democratic, especially regarding the interests of low income participants? | Intensive one-county study: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. participant-observation b. pre/post focus groups c. mid/post conference evaluation d. structured observations in conference e. post interviews |

~2–7 mo after the search conferences. By 8–12 mo postconference, 13 working groups still considered themselves active; and by 18 mo postconference only four groups were still active. Thus, although a diverse set of projects and actions were initiated and/or completed during the lifetime of these groups, the results revealed a steady attenuation in participation over time, when working group participation is used as the sole indicator.

In contrast to these findings, the 18-mo interviews suggested that other metrics may be needed to understand the full impact of the project (5). Specifically, these interviews revealed that, although only four of the 34 working groups were still meeting as a group, 16 still had members connecting with one another on common activities, 22 had involved others from the community in ideas and projects, 19 had members who had added new ideas or tasks to their existing jobs, 22 felt they had “made progress” and 16 said they still wanted support so they could continue their work. These indicators suggest the possibility of a larger but more diffuse set of impacts or ripple effects from the North Country Project. The available data do not allow us to ascertain the extent to which these diffuse impacts led to tangible changes in programs, services or other actions.

A large part of the explanation for the attenuation over time appears to relate to the incompatibility between the working group action plans formulated at the search conferences and the existing institutional agendas at local, state and federal levels. At the local level, follow-up interviews revealed a strong desire for institutional support, either from Cooperative Extension (CCE) or another agency, to continue to convene the working groups, facilitate the ongoing process of negotiating goals and responsibilities among its members and broker relationships with other community members or organizations whose support was needed to implement various actions (5). Although there is a close fit between the mission of CCE and the action plans, in most cases the staff either could not add these tasks to their existing work plans or they did not receive support from their supervisors.

This incompatibility was apparent at the state level as well. First, the multicounty conference in Albany revealed a mismatch between the categorical funding sources of state agencies and the goals and action plans articulated by the counties. Second, efforts by many working groups to implement their action plans often were frustrated by local, state or federal regulations related, for instance, to the National School Lunch Program, community distribution of surplus food from a nearby military base and food safety regulations that created barriers to starting local processing ventures. These experiences suggest that the enhanced administrative flexibility promised in the federal “re-inventing government initiative” is still falling far short of what will be needed for localities to respond to their new responsibilities and opportunities.

Participation, power and democracy. A detailed study in one county (6) used a three-dimensional framework to assess how power influenced participation in decision making, agenda setting and the shaping of perceived needs within one of the counties’ search conferences. In this research power was defined as the capacity to produce intended, foreseen or unforeseen effects on others based on the ability to control access to valued resources (7). This three-dimensional framework, first proposed by Lukes (8) and later used by Gaventa (9) and Forester (10), maintains that power in society operates by influencing 1) the forms and patterns of participation in decision making; 2) institutional agenda setting, defined as a set of predominant values, beliefs, rituals and institutional procedures that operate systematically and consistently to the ben-

efit of some persons and groups at the expense of others; and 3) the shaping of perceived needs, or the ability of powerful groups to frame social and political issues through defining the causes and solutions to identified problems. The one-county study (6) used a case study design and multiple data collection methods including pre- and postsearch conference focus groups with 14 disenfranchised stakeholders (including seven who attended the search conference and seven who did not). Focus groups provided a “safe environment” (i.e., where authoritative interests and values were not present) for these individuals to discuss the food system issues of greatest concern to them, and to examine the extent to which these were raised, discussed and addressed in one county’s search conference. Data were also collected through the use of in-depth interviews with powerful and disenfranchised stakeholders, structured behavioral observations, open-ended questionnaires (distributed at the search conference) and participant-observation methods. A powerful stakeholder in this research was defined as an individual’s organizational decision-making authority and access to valued resources (7). This study led to several important findings:

1. Despite possessing diverse values, interests, knowledge and beliefs, the 44 participants in this county were able to agree on nine overarching goals and resulted in the formation of six action agendas and working groups to pursue those goals after the conference, as claimed by search conference proponents (3).
2. Despite an apparent consensus on an agreed-on set of goals and action agendas, the study documented that the complex set of social dynamics (including the use of power) influenced agenda setting, and ultimately which issues became part of the final action agendas. For example, members of a community-based advisory committee ($n = 11$) made the decision not to report certain information on controversial issues to search conference participants, such as current levels of agricultural pesticide use and the knowledge that some elderly residents were consuming pet food because of inadequate income.
3. The net result of these social dynamics is that six of the nine most salient interests of the powerful participants were included on the final action agendas, compared to only two out of the nine interests of disenfranchised stakeholders. The two issues from the disenfranchised participants’ list of most salient interests that made it onto the final action agendas were issues that overlapped with the powerful participants’ list of most salient interests, (e.g., the need for consumer education and increased availability of locally produced food).

Finally, one of the most striking findings relates to the extent to which the disenfranchised participants identified a distinctive set of seven salient issues in the safe environment of the preconference focus groups, and identified the same set of issues in the postconference focus groups. Nonetheless, disenfranchised participants either did not voice the majority of their most salient interests/concerns during the search conference, or were not embraced by others at the search conference. Furthermore, as the search conference progressed, the interests/concerns of the disenfranchised participants became increasingly similar to those of other search conference participants, and less similar to the interests they expressed at the beginning of the search conference. When asked about the fairness of the search conference proceedings, disenfranchised participants reported that they were satisfied with the search conference process and were not upset by the relative lack of attention to their own concerns/interests. However, after the search conference, when they critically reflected on their

previously defined interests/concerns, disenfranchised stakeholders reported feeling that the majority of their most salient interests, including concerns about higher food prices in lower income neighborhoods, food safety, lack of access to high quality food, store fraud and false advertising, and the negative impact of advertising on diet and health, were not given adequate attention during the search conference (6).

DISCUSSION

The North Country Project provides several insights relevant for understanding the roles of power and beliefs in the practice of public nutrition.

1. *Viewpoints before and after participation:* Although some change in viewpoints may have been expected as a result of increased awareness of issues and the powerful social learning processes that take place during a search conference, the 88% increase in membership in the Pragmatist viewpoint represents a *narrowing* of perspective rather than the broadening that might have been expected. Although the explanation is unclear, this result suggests that highly participatory decision-making processes may shape values and interests (viewpoints) of participating stakeholders, but not always produce expected changes in viewpoints.
2. *Collective viewpoints and participation:* These conferences produced highly energized discussions of the changes taking place in the food system, and in the larger social and political system within which it is embedded. They also produced action agendas that, in effect, sought to counter those trends through a variety of projects and actions directed toward the local food system. Thus, the discourse that took place during the search conferences and the resulting collective action plans confirm the salience of “food system re-localization” as a value held not only by the CFS movement but also by diverse people in rural communities that were previously unaware of this movement. The commonly expressed comment at the conferences, “I had no idea others felt the way I do about these issues,” suggests that a collective discussion may be required for certain types of salient values to surface and for collective action to form around these values.
3. *Viewpoints, interests, power and participation:* The foregoing suggestion, that collective discussion might be a critical ingredient for identifying collective actions, would appear to lend support to more extensive use of participatory decision-making procedures in communities and organizations. This is because it often is assumed that collective actions decided in this way are more likely to be directed toward the common interest. Two insights from the North Country Project highlight the danger of conflating these concepts. First, McCullum’s microstudy provided convincing evidence of the ways in which power can influence agenda setting, and resulting action agendas and the shaping of perceived needs, even in a participatory process that appears fair, energizing and satisfying to the internal participants and external observers. Thus, collective discussion and decision making does not necessarily identify all the common interest and the concerns of all subgroups. Second, some of the discussions and decisions occurred without the benefit of certain types of external knowledge and/or sufficient normative challenge. External knowledge in this context refers to certain legal, admin-

istrative or technical matters. Normative challenge refers to the opportunity for the ethical implications of some of their discussions and decisions to be more explicitly brought to their attention. In both cases, such interventions may have had a substantial impact on the discussions and voluntary decisions of the groups, without necessarily implying any external coercion.

4. *Values, interests, power and action:* As noted, there was a sharp attenuation of working group activity in the 18 mo after the search conferences. This is related to the lack of meaningful support for these groups from local organizations—even those that had sponsored and/or participated in the conferences—and there was a marked incompatibility between the goals and actions plans created at the search conferences and the funding priorities and regulations from state and local institutions.

This latter observation provides the vital link to the eight key shifts in power and beliefs noted in Table 1. As noted, the North Country Project built on many of these changes. Yet, if it was so consistent with these key shifts in beliefs and power within U.S. society, why did the energy and activity of the 34 working groups attenuate, rather than expand, after the search conferences? The answer appears to lie in the fact that, despite these recent macrolevel shifts in beliefs and power, the situation in the United States and elsewhere might best be described as “old structures coping with new conditions.” These old structures take the form of government agencies and subunits, each with multiple programs that are not integrated in their goals, implementation or evaluation. They also take the form of regulations issued by these agencies, which create powerful incentives or barriers to change in markets and communities. The “re-inventing government initiative,” which ostensibly proposes to foster greater stakeholder participation, promotes more administrative flexibility and greater accountability for demonstrating impact, is simply overlaid onto the preexisting and rather obsolete structures, authority patterns and resource flows. Among other things, this implies that future efforts to promote public nutrition actions that are more responsive to more broadly shared or newly emerging public values should focus on coordinating the “upstream” decision-making processes at state, federal and international levels, in addition to those taking place at the community level.

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