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Exploring the Meanings of Food and Agriculture for Latino Youth Through The Use of PhotoVoice in Three Iowa Cities

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Abstract

Using PhotoVoice as a tool for participatory action research, 10 Latino high school students, from three different cities of Iowa, Des Moines, Council Bluffs and Ottumwa, completed a project developed by Iowa State University Sociology Extension. The students explored the cultural meanings of food and agriculture within their families and in their communities. Participants were asked to reflect on and describe their pictures, incorporating their points of view on the different elements that integrated local food systems. We coded their final essays in NVIVO using the Community Capital Framework (CCF) to evaluate students' experiences and perceptions of food-value chains in their communities. The results showed cultural capital and bonding social capital to be the dominant themes, followed by health and nutrition (human capital) and natural capital (emphasis on home gardens and fresh vegetables). Financial capital, built and political capital indicators were mentioned incidentally to other capitals. Recommendations in this paper center on improving the use of PhotoVoice among Latino youth.

Keywords: culture, community, local food, Latino youth

Introduction and Objectives

In an effort to better integrate immigrant populations into the local community, Latino high school students, from three different communities in Iowa, Des Moines, Council Bluffs and Ottumwa, participated in a PhotoVoice project with ISU Sociology Extension. Through photography, students were able to artistically engage their local food system and better understand how they are an integral part of this network. This project was made possible by collaboration with regional food groups and their sponsoring organizations in each region.

This work focuses on building awareness by immigrant youth (mostly in high school) in respect to social and cultural aspects of food and its origins. This has been done through PhotoVoice, a project that required Latino immigrant youth to take pictures of food and other parts of the food value chain. They reflected on how their food is produced, processed, distributed, marketed, consumed, and wrote brief personal commentaries regarding the meaning of images. This allowed them to reflect on how food strengthens culture, on the agricultural heritage of their families, and to address questions of sustainability and nutrition of the food they photographed.

After taking photos and reflecting on them, students were asked to write an essay about their experience in the project and to select three or four pictures representing the most significant experiences and meanings through the PhotoVoice project. They then presented their posters to a community meeting that included family, friends, and community leaders.

Using the Community Capitals Framework (CCF), this paper analyzes students' experiences and the importance of food and agriculture not only for them but also for their communities. Recommendations centered on the analysis of the final evaluation and improving the use of PhotoVoice among Latino youth as well as its potential for similar endeavors.

Methodology and Conceptual Framework

“PhotoVoice is a community-based participatory research process that uses photography as a tool

for engaging people in a critical reflection process around a specific issue. The researchers believe it is a powerful tool for conducting research with vulnerable populations because it allows the participants to share their perspectives on issues in ways in which they can more directly relate. PhotoVoice helps participants visualize their perspectives by providing an extended time to reflect on their responses” (Jeanetta, Dannerbeck, Valdivia, & Flores, 2010).

The use of this method allowed students to be actively involved in all phases of the project as early investigators. The use of this method also facilitated the involvement of the local Latino communities (mainly through the students' families) by their opinions regarding the role of food and agriculture in the family's cultural capital. One of the reasons, by which PhotoVoice was chosen, was to examine serious issues around food and agriculture in Iowa and the potential that this method has to give voice to underserved or minority groups. It also examines these issues while incorporating creativity and collaboration, in a way that encourages participation from community members (Blackman and Fairey 2007).

The results of this project were analyzed using the CCF, which includes seven types of capital: 1) natural; 2) cultural; 3) human; 4) social; 5) political; 6) financial; and 7) built (Flora and Flora, 2008). Each capital is defined and then related to the objectives of the PhotoVoice project.

Natural capital provides possibilities and limits to human action and is composed by air quality, wind, sun, water, soil, minerals, biodiversity, landscape, and extreme events. The goal of sustainable, healthy ecosystems with multiple community benefits means that human communities plan and act accordingly with natural systems.

Cultural capital is transmitted through the socialization process (Flora and Flora, 2008). Cultural capital is the way that people understand the world surrounding them. It determines how we see the world, what we take for granted, what we value, and what things we think are possible to change.

Human capital includes education, skills, experience, health, self-esteem, and self-efficacy. Human

capital includes the characteristics and potentials of individuals that are determined by the intersection of nature (genetics) and nurture (social interactions and the environment).

Social Capital involves mutual trust, reciprocity, organizing groups, establishing collective identity and a sense of shared future, and working together. It is the interactions among individuals that occur with a degree of frequency and comfort.

Bonding social capital consists of interactions within a specific group and bridging social capital consists of interactions among diverse social groups. The goals for this project were to improve community initiatives, responsibility, and adaptability through shared visions, building on internal resources, and strengthening families as a basis for community participation.

Political capital represents the power to influence the market, state, civil society, laws, and conventions (Flora and Flora, 2008). Political capital includes voice, power, organization, and connections.

Financial capital includes savings, income generation, business earning, payment for environmental services, loans and credit, investments, and taxes, gifts/philanthropy, among others. Financial capital is often privileged because it is easy to measure, and there is a tendency to put other capitals into financial capital terms.

Built capital is composed of infrastructure and tools. Built capital in agricultural and food systems could include roads, bridges and trails, community stores, school cafeterias, day care centers, kitchen incubators, play grounds, gardening tools, fencing, and water systems.

The PhotoVoice and text analysis methods allowed us to identify the community capitals that participants in these three projects highlighted in their final projects and allowed Latino youth to reflect on possible improvements in local agricultural and food systems. This process is a modest investment in community capitals to create new resources over a long time horizon and facilitate the integration of young immigrants in new destiny rural and urban communities through their better understanding of the multiple facets of the food value chain.

Results

The results are presented under the rubric of the community capitals. While quotes were selected to illustrate a particular capital, they often touch on two or more.

Natural Capital

Students learned about the importance of natural capital when they learned how rewarding it is to grow their own food in their gardens. This provides them with multiple benefits including the opportunity to eat fresh food everyday and to live in a healthier community:

It was very refreshing to know that some of my family's friends had already taken the steps to having their own gardens, and that inspired my family to start our own. -Elena

It would be nice if every household had their own family gardens where fresh produce was provided by the careful and good keep of the plants as they grow. -Jesús

Cultural Capital

Elena and Fernando discuss the deep connections between food and culture, and how this is crucial to preserve their Latino heritage. For them, eating home-cooked meals represented not only the benefits of enjoying healthy and delicious food, but also the privilege of being surrounded by a unified and harmonious family. Positive spillover builds other capitals.

When we all put some thought into it, we are a community that must stick together in order to keep customs alive, like home cooked meals rather than fast food, and gardens that don't use pesticides. -Elena

My mom is important to my family because she cooks all the meals. She cooks once every

day after I get out of school, and only on the weekend does she cook 2 or 3 times. My mom makes all the food we eat delicious, that's why I prefer to stay home and eat rather than go out. I think that home cooked meals taste better and are healthier than going out to eat. -Fernando

Human Capital

Human capital was a great learning outcome for the participants. According to their reflections, the students could become advocates for changing their community's eating habits. But the over all, human gain showed that they could become facilitators by sharing this knowledge with other communities and to replicate this experience in other social groups.

When I first began taking pictures here and there, it felt like it was almost just any other assignment in school. But towards the middle of the summer, I began to see that this was my chance to really take an interest in health... If we had better food in our surroundings, the community would improve a lot. We would all not only be healthier, but we would also be a great example to other minority groups. -Elena

Social Capital

This project helped Fernando and the other students realize the positive distinctions between Latino family-oriented cultural values and the dominant culture. Participants also learned that embracing their own values as Latinos, they could understand their context better, learn about the differences, and reconcile both traditions.

Bonding Social Capital

Students recognized how food brings families together, and through this experience they reinforce their social bonds and create a network that supports them even beyond family. Fernando distinguishes between his family and others in discussing his photo of an extended family dinner:

This picture is important to me because it shows how food brings my family close together, because we are always eating together during holidays and weekends. I think my family is different from most of my friends' families because my family is closer together, and we get together and eat at each others' houses every weekend. -Fernando

Bridging Social Capital

When neighbors, non-Latino friends, and people from other cultures are welcoming at their tables, a sense of belonging and satisfaction arises, bridging communities. We turn again to Fernando, who explains a picture of his White neighbor's tomato plants, showing how food and agriculture can build bridging social capital:

This is my neighbor's garden in his backyard on the East side of Des Moines. I think this garden brings my family closer to our neighbor because they give us some of the tomatoes when he is done growing them, and in return we give him some of our Mexican food that my mom cooks. I think these tomatoes and vegetables are better than the ones at the store because they are closer to home, and in my opinion they taste better, and are fresher. -Fernando

Financial and Built Capital

Jesús recognized the relationship between local foods and financial savings, but that some investment is necessary to build a local food system:

I really wish we had more greenhouses where we could grow our own vegetables that way people can insure that their food is 100% natural, the quality is better insured, and with that it would decrease the amount of money paid all the time for the importation of food for our community and our families. -Jesús

Political Capital

Only one student included an implicit bow to political capital in his essay. Fernando recognized the link between political interests and obesity (and therefore, health, an aspect of human capital).

The changes I would like to create in my community by showing my work is to have less fast food places around here. I would like to see more authentic Mexican restaurants with real Mexican food that is home made. I would like to see more people eating right and eating healthy foods in my community instead of fast food. This would help lower the overweight rate in the community. I would like to see more restaurants instead of McDonalds and Burger King. -Fernando

Discussion

One student expressed how well cultural and human capital were built through the project. It enlivened his sociological imagination:

The photo-voice taught me very valuable skills, among them were the ability to look beyond the surface of an image. It taught me about the much deeper message being sent out and how most people fail to see it. -Joel

This was exactly the kind of reflexivity that we were seeking to instill through the participatory methodology of PhotoVoice. Other aspects of reflexivity were expressed in the linkages that they made among various capitals. For example, Jesús growing his own vegetables rather than importing them showed built, human, and financial capital. Another example that showed human and built capital was Fernando's recognition of health implications of authentic Mexican food over fast food restaurants. The students that participated in this study focused on the "soft" capitals (cultural, social, and human capitals) rather than the "hard" ones (financial, built capital). They almost entirely ignored political

capital, which perhaps, is near the middle of this soft-hard continuum.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The following conclusions can be drawn:

1. Cultural capital and bonding social capital were arguably the dominant themes. Food was seen through the lens of the strengthened family and of continuing cultural heritage.
2. Some students picked up on the importance of fresh food, local food, and the nutritional advantages of following Latino food habits (human and natural capitals).
3. Students did not emphasize political, financial, and built capital. Two students saw a financial angle to community gardens and local food production. Only one student mentioned political capital, but this capital was strengthened through the students' participation in local meetings where they presented their PhotoVoice posters to community leaders.

The experience generated the following recommendations for future projects:

1. Greater involvement of parents from the start could facilitate better student involvement and performance.
2. Through their families, Latino students learned the meaning of food in their own cultures, and could be encouraged to discover local resources already in place in their community's local food system.
3. Involving teachers and school administrators could increase student participation, generate educational opportunities, and projects to introduce local foods in schools.

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