Where’s my shop?

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Introduction

Research in the area of consumption ethics has privileged a focus on niche groups of self-defined ethical consumers (e.g., Black and Cherrier, 2010). A notable exception is the work of Hall (2011) who has explored the ethics of consumption during austerity. We seek to extend the reach of this research by examining consumption ethics where deprivation has existed over generations and where retail access to food is limited. In keeping with research highlighting the social significance of food in urban space (e.g., Crossan et al., 2016), in this short paper we emphasise the importance of the ‘social’, in terms of the importance of the interaction and engagement of communities, neglected in research where food access is challenged and place is disrupted through urban renewal processes (Howerton and Trauger, 2017). To illustrate our case we focus on the social significance of cohesive local communities in issues of food access and in doing so we find issues of local economy, food waste and sharing important.

Ethics of Consumption

Research exploring ethical consumption has grown significantly over recent decades (e.g., Caruana et al., 2016; Newhom and Shaw, 2007). Much of this work has approached consumption ethics as a lifestyle choice. This neglects the potentially wider ranging nature of this topic. As such, we prefer the term “ethics of consumption” as a means to explore more broadly the multiple motivations, practices and places that constitute everyday consumption (e.g., Barnett et al., 2005; Hall, 2015). Such a perspective allows us to consider an ethics of consumption among those for whom their consumption lifestyle is less of a choice but more reflective of imposed and continued adversity. How ethics are played out in such circumstances has been overlooked in research to-date (Hall, 2011; 2015). For many, in their everyday food consumption choices they face challenges in relation to access to affordable produce in their local community (e.g., Mills and Wright, 2015). In this paper we seek to explore how ethics in consumption may manifest in a community experiencing these challenges.

Background

In examining how consumption ethics play out where food access is limited, we draw upon ongoing research into food provision in a classic old industrial city that has undergone both deindustrialisation and various attempts at regenerating and reimagining over the past three decades (MacLeod, 2002, Helms and Cumbers, 2006, Cumbers et
al., 2010). The area of the city where the research is located has undergone three waves of regeneration seeing the population fall from over 50,000 in the 1950s to less than 2,000 today. This is as a result of manufacturing decline and a programme of demolition. The area is home to some of the highest levels of deprivation in the UK. Past attempts at regeneration have failed and the latest regeneration project, resulting from a successful bid to host an international event, was heralded as an opportunity for the development of new infrastructure and facilities that would provide the catalyst for economic rejuvenation. This project, however, was driven largely by property based development without accompanying services, while eradicating much of the existing local food retail facilities. For example, to make way for the event the high street of shops and community centre were demolished. Nearly four years later the site remains among the country’s most deprived neighbourhoods, across income, health and education indicators. Displacement of local people and a loss of retail services has meant that access to food has become a critical issue. Repeatedly in our interactions with the local community we are told, ‘we just want our shop.’ Given the lack of access to food, particularly for those without access to a car, this community is now living in a food desert (Howerton and Trauger, 2017).

In this case, we see a severe disruption to the places of food consumption at the local level. Displacement of place identity, attachment and resultant social bonding (e.g., Lewicka, 2008) that were bound up in previous consumption practices also displaces the spaces of consumption ethics. How we understand places of consumption ethics assumes a renewed significance as people seek to manage the complexity, compromise and organisation of food access in a food desert. Such disruption also necessitates a renegotiation of everyday consumption routines. We explore this in the empirical evidence that follows and find an ethics of consumption in coping in the present, memories of the past and aspirations for the future.

Method

The empirical work used to support our arguments took place over a 6-month period between August and December 2017 and is part of an ongoing project concerned with food provision, health and sustainability. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 19 local residents, obtained through snowballing which sought demographic diversity1 (see Table 1). Participant observations were conducted at local food and community related events as a means to both generate interview participants and to observe interactions and discussions around food. A field journal was used to record researcher thoughts, feelings and interactions. Interviews were transcribed verbatim and pseudonyms have been adopted throughout the reporting of this research. Interview transcripts, along with observations, were open-coded to form initial categories and emergent themes. Through an iterative process across and within the data, initial categories where modified to reveal key relations (Miles and Huberman, 1994). During this process interviews, observations and field notes were placed in dialogue with each other to facilitate a wide-reaching understanding of the phenomenon under investigation. The analysis process was conducted in parallel by the authors and deliberated until agreement was reached.

1 We experienced a bias towards females being willing to talk about food and managing household food decision-making.
Table 1 Participant Table

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Children</th>
<th>Employment Status</th>
</tr>
</thead>
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<tr>
<td>Alex</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>65-70</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Retired</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anna</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>20-25</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Student</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brandon</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>25-30</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Employed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bryony</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>40-45</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Employed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charlie</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>25-30</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Employed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Claire</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>30-35</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Unemployed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cory</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>25-30</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Employed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dawn</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>45-50</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Employed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Derek</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>50-55</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Unemployed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Esther</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>20-25</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Employed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Felicity</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>40-45</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Unemployed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gemma</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>40-45</td>
<td>N</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Georgia</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>25-30</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Unemployed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Harriet</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>35-40</td>
<td>N</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hazel</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>60-65</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Unemployed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iris</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>45-50</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Unemployed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jackie</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>60-65</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Retired</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jane</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>20-25</td>
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<tr>
<td>Natasha</td>
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<td>70-75</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Retired</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Findings

In what follows we present our findings organised around 3 emergent key themes of ‘local provision – social place’, ‘concerns about waste’ and ‘caring and sharing’.

Local Provision – Social Place

In consumption ethics, research has explored the concept of the ‘local’ from the perspective of sustainability (e.g., Berti and Mulligan, 2016), food miles (e.g., Schnell, 2013) and ‘buy local’ (e.g., Bianchi and Mortimer, 2015). In our current research, we find local food provision as critical in supporting a social infrastructure for individuals and community, combining people and place in an ethics of consumption. The food provision that had existed prior to regeneration served as an important ‘third space’ for the local community (Soja, 1996) that facilitated informal gathering, conversation, social bonding, connectedness and trust (Peters, 2016):

“You went to the shop it took you about two and a half hours! You’d only have went for a loaf! Because you did meet everybody and you would gab [talk] on the way there, and especially when we had three shops, the fruit n’ veg, the butchers, and this sort of convenience…and there was an off sales as well at one time…it didn’t matter if you weren’t going into all the shops because if you were gabbing to someone and they were off to the butchers you automatically went with them. And while you were in the butchers you were like ‘Oh I’ll try some of that’. That all worked, you know…You found out
everything in the locals because they were all shops that were run by, or worked in by folk that stayed here...Especially at the bottom of the road...that corner, people stood at corners and bled and gabbed and put the world to rights...It was great here... it was right up until they brought the diggers in...slowly blocking folk out...and there were fights to keep the shops and ‘Nah nah doesn’t matter, compulsory purchase, your shop’s shut’...that’s when it all changed” (Hazel).

Among participants, and as illustrated by Hazel, we found place attachment through long-term residence and social ties (Stedman, 2003), place identity through distinctiveness as a member of this specific community (Proshansky, 1978) and place memory embedded in physical and social structures (Lewicka, 2008). We spoke to families with 4 generations living in the community, who were born and raised in the area and who shared stories centred on local food provision and social bonding. Local shops were trusted as reliable sources of quality food through which families had interacted and shared knowledge about down the generations.

While no longer in the physical environment, the local retail provision that had existed prior to regeneration was kept alive in memory. Urban reminders abound for residents that included new housing developments and derelict land where new retail provision was promised, but yet to materialise and where old retail provision had been. Although regeneration brought new housing and residents, the loss of third places of food provision has not allowed connections to be forged between existing and new residents, leading to tensions and ‘othering’ via difference. Thus, we find tensions with local authorities responsible for regeneration and with new residents who have come into the area as a result of the regeneration:

“They told us there were going to be shops and 24 hour cafes and there was gonna be this and that, but it was all going to be in the village [new housing development]. They were excluding, we were excluded because I’m on this side, I’m no in the village. We are the ones that have been inconvenienced, they weren’t here from the start...I never got offered one of them [new houses]” (Francis).

Without a local retail place, the ethics of consumption experienced between people and places was disrupted and, in some instances, eliminated. The loss of local food provision goes beyond issues of geographical access (Howerton and Trauger, 2017), emotional bonds have an impact on well-being, providing psychological balance and a sense of stability (Lewicka, 2008). This is particularly significant where an existing place-based community has been disrupted, as evidenced in the current research. With a static physical means of food access dislocated, some residents turned to a community facebook page in their attempts to locate place in their local environment. Many noted that this online platform is dominated by the question “where’s the van?” ‘The van’ is a traditional ice cream van, which, following the removal of in-community retail provision, begun stocking essential items for local residents.

While research has explored the interaction between physical third place and online spaces (e.g., Forlano, 2009) and suggested that online space can function as a third place (e.g., Kleinman, 2006), in the current research online space was used predominantly as a means to locate physical local food provision in diminished circumstances. Further, physical place was essential for those residents not connected to the community online space. ‘The van’ was viewed as a poor substitute for previous food provision in the area. In an area, however, where many residents have mobility issues, car ownership is low and where food access is hampered by a 20 minutes walk to a large supermarket, across a busy road,
with an unreliable bus service, the van played an important role in the community in providing essentials such as bread and milk. Further, the van was considered local by virtue of being resident in the community, unlike supermarkets some 20 minute walk away. Further, supermarkets were regarded as playing a frustrating role in encouraging waste.

**Concerns about Waste**

Food waste has a significant environmental impact and the role of the consumer in food waste remains a key concern (Aschemann-Witzel et al., 2017). Hall (2011) highlights issues of waste in relation to austerity. While in keeping with Hall we find financial implications important, for our participants we found such concerns bound up with the need for local food provision:

“…there’s a plethora of giant supermarkets and I hate going to the supermarket…yes I have to use Tesco or Asda. But I always end up coming out with stuff that’s just more than I expected to buy, or less healthy options. Staff that I didn’t want to buy but I’ve ended up coming away, cos it’s 2 for 1 or 3 for 1, or whatever else. So I would like to be able to buy daily essential, fresh produce, things that I use all the time” (Harriet).

Packaged fruit and vegetables and multi-buy offers were viewed as wasteful by participants who wanted to buy exactly what they need. They did not like supermarkets due to the large range of stock on offer that was a temptation when trying to locate the items they planned to buy. Many found the practices of supermarkets ethically questionable in terms of product placement designed to encourage purchasing. Unlike a small local food shop, in large supermarkets “…you can’t buy loose, so you feel like you have to buy an 8 bag of apples but you might only want 2” (Esther). Block et al. (2016) argue that consumer food waste occurs in the sequence from point of sale, acquisition, consumption and disposition. We find consumers who wish to avoid waste at the beginning of this cycle and view local retailers who enable the purchase of loose unpackaged produce as a means to achieve this. Such a view runs contrary to the efforts put into motivating consumers to reduce food waste post-purchase (Aschemann-Witzel et al., 2017). Indeed, contrary to Block et al. (2016) we find our participants are good planners and tend to shop with a list that they stick to, driven in part by financial restrictions.

**Caring and Sharing**

Residents were very aware of those left vulnerable as a result of the loss of their local food provision, demonstrating an important and resilient sense of urban community and self-help (Cumbers et al., 2010), despite the ruptures brought about by regeneration. Many took action to ensure that their elderly neighbours and/or those with mobility problems could access food. This took the form of going to get their shopping, sharing cooked meals and, as the following excerpt reveals, growing vegetables to provide for neighbours:

“He and I went out for a full day a couple of months ago to find an allotment or plot to start growing vegetables in, because quite a few of his neighbours are from Poland and he is really concerned they don’t have enough money to buy quality vegetables for their kids” (Georgia).
For many the sharing of food was an established practice. Some participants cited not having or using a freezer as any leftover food would get used by family or neighbours. Again, however, the social dimension was central, Felicity notes the:

“Significant impact on elderly, they miss out, you don’t see anybody now, there’s naebody out, see before they could pop out and they were always talking in the street, you don’t see anybody” (Felicity).

Through practices of sharing, residents were able to help ensure not only that those in need had access to food, but also to social interaction. There has been research interest in sharing as a means of more ethical/sustainable consumption (e.g., Ozanne and Ballantine, 2010). Beyond, for example, online platforms and sharing schemes (e.g., Möhlmann, 2015), the current research highlights the critical role that sharing plays in social reproduction and ultimately human survival (Belk, 2018). Here we see the emotional, human bonds and sense of responsibility that has been theorised as consumption ethics (e.g. Carrier, 1990; Miller, 1998) that goes beyond a focus on the physical sharing of such activities. Our participants very much position caring in sharing.

**Conclusion**

In this research, we reveal how an ethics of consumption is negotiated for a deprived community living in a food desert. We highlight the importance and preference for local small-scale food provision pertinent to developing local economies (e.g., Hughes and Boys, 2015; Schmitt et al., 2016). Such provision is neglected in food desert research (Howerton and Trauger, 2017) and, as such, the role of local provision and social interactions in food access is overlooked. Large supermarkets fail as a substitute for the third places of local food provision. They do not offer the spaces of sociability and, as such, fail to encourage the sharing of information, lending of support and social interactions critical to social bonding among disparate groups where old residents remain and new are jettisoned in. Supermarkets lack appeal in terms of size, layout and approaches to packaging fresh produce. Our findings suggest that economic development that integrates community organising and place making are key to mitigating social exclusion in food deserts. Thus, rather than supermarkets we see the potential for community based retail and social enterprises. A range of global initiatives based around such approaches abound offering important learnings for the current community and other communities facing similar problems (e.g., Caspi et al., 2012; Mount et al., 2013). Such provision was viewed as critical to social integration within our community:

“Get a shop here as soon as possible. Once we get a shop here it’ll change everybody’s views and perceptions, once we get a shop here people will start integrating and become part of the same community…if you can get people to buy into it then they will buy from it” (Brandon).

We, therefore, find an ethics of consumption in and around the people and places that make up a local community and highlight the significance of local space in understanding, and facilitating, ethics in everyday food retail experiences.
References


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Biographies

Deirdre Shaw is Professor Marketing and Consumer Research at University of Glasgow. Deirdre has researched the area of consumption ethics throughout her career, publishing on the subject in a range of international journals (including Psychology and Marketing, Journal of Business Ethics, European Journal of Marketing, Business History, British Journal of Management, Journal of Consumer Culture), contributing to books and non-academic publications, giving invited talks and supervising PhD researchers in this area.

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