

What's local? Access to fresh food for older people

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Abstract

This paper seeks to engage with two key debates: how we understand 'local' with respect to the ways in which people move around local economies to buy food; and what this tells us about food planning and policies to reduce the length of the food supply chain. Using a focus group of older people in Brighton & Hove, England, the paper suggests that the social experience of food shopping is informed by individual's cultural capital, allied to the ways in which they travel around the city. In contrast, food planning is dominated by imperatives to localise the points of both production and sale, apparently with scant regard for the rather different connections between production and sale made by the shoppers themselves. The paper concludes that, for the older people in the study at least, 'local' is little more than a spatial referent along a continuum of shopping experiences. For 'local food' to gain purchase, therefore, it must be integrated into the continuum in such a way that it adds to, rather than substitutes for, existing food choices.

Key words: local food; food shopping; older people; food choices; food supply chains

Introduction

It is widely claimed that the recent decentralisation and commodification of food retailing in many western cities has significant impacts on older and less mobile people, by creating 'food deserts' that put them at greater nutritional risk than the wider population, particularly in terms of access to fresh food (Herne, 1995; Hare, et al, 2001; Clarke, et al, 2004; Wilson, et al, 2004; Community Food and Health Scotland, 2010). It has also been claimed that such an approach to food distribution diminishes many older people's lives, for a range of reasons related to social and culinary alienation and stress (Hare, et al, 1999; Meneely, et al, 2009), leading to questions about distributional equity (Morgan, 2010; Morgan and Sonnino, 2010) and public health (Ellaway and Macintyre, 2000; Kyle and Blair, 2007). In addressing this situation there has been an increasing trend, in Europe and America, to question how access to fresh and healthy food can be brought into land use planning decisions (Food Commission and Sustain, n.d.; Morgan, 2009; Morgan and Sonnino, 2010). This has

included efforts to shorten or remove the food chain, through the provision of more allotment gardens and support for more farmers' markets, for example (Jones, et al, 2004; Duffy, et al, 2005; Perez-Vazquez, A, et al, 2006; Donald, et al, 2010; Marsden, 2010; Murtagh, 2010), and by encouraging new forms of community supported urban agriculture that offer renewed connections between producers and consumers (Viljoen, 2005; Ravenscroft and Taylor, 2009).

However, location decisions about food supply may not, of themselves, be the overarching issues in excluding people from access to healthy food. Rather, evidence is emerging that many people – including the elderly and less mobile – have developed strategies for overcoming spatial exclusion (Bowyer, et al, 2009). This suggests that there is a level of complexity to access (and localisation) that extends beyond distance and provenance alone, raising the spectre that understandings of 'local', in the context of food, are contingent (see Herne, 1995; Clarke, et al, 2004; Wilson, et al, 2004). There is, consequently, a need to rethink the ways in which we understand the spatial arrangement of food retail and its relationship with local cultures, lifestyles and identities. In particular, there is a need to develop a better understanding of the ways in which people access food in local economies, to ensure that new forms of spatial equity are developed that address the needs of older and less mobile people. Using a case study in Brighton & Hove, England, this paper seeks to review the evidence available about the decisions that older people make about how, where and when they access food, as a contribution to the debate about the significance and distributional equity of 'local food' and the implications that this has for retail location planning.

Food choice and its implications for retail location

Conventional literature on food choice assumes an economically-rational individual weighing up the costs and benefits of different foods, at different prices, bought in different places. The growth of large edge-of-town supermarkets has been predicated on this assumption, on the basis that ease of

access to a single retail point that offers consistent quality at low prices will address all that the economically-rational individual requires (Clarke, 2000). This has been borne out in practice, with the four main supermarket chains dominating retail food sales by volume and geographical distribution (Guy, et al, 2004; Hollingsworth, 2004). The growth of home delivery by these same retailers has been predicated on further market domination by saving these same consumers the need to travel while offering them the same range and price of foods (Boyer, et al, 2003; Hackney, et al, 2006).

Despite this, many small independent shops remain, often in the poorer areas of cities (Guy, et al, 2004), while there has been an increase in the popularity of farmers' markets and specialist shops related to high quality, often high price 'local food' (Jones, et al, 2004; Guthrie, et al, 2006). These shops trade on the basis of niche – providing what the supermarkets cannot, or will not. In the main, this is about convenience for small amounts of shopping (Bowyer, et al, 2009), lack of access to alternatives (Clarke, et al, 2004; Guy, et al, 2004; Bowyer, et al, 2009) and, for shops providing locally sourced food, ethical considerations around local food and perceptions about shortening the length of the food supply chain (Guthrie, et al, 2006).

Yet it is about more than this, for there is evidence that many people do not display the rationality so cherished by the supermarkets, and make their food shopping decisions on a range of criteria that are dominated by questions of lifestyle, identity and gender, as well as issues such as price and quality (Clarke, 2000; Ellaway and Macintyre, 2000; Beardsworth, et al, 2002). Even within supermarkets, there is a growing literature about the practicality and functionality of shopping for large quantities of food in a single place, particularly if shoppers are reliant on public transport, while many people find the supermarkets and their staff lack character (see Pettigrew, et al, 2005). For Clarke, et al (2004), the flaw in consumer theory is to assume that decision-making about food purchases is little different to decisions in other spheres, particularly in assuming that we act as

individuals who have a choice and proceed to exercise this choice. In most cases we do not make decisions in isolation, but in relation to others – who we might want to meet, or not, and where we like, or do not like, to shop. And many people do not really experience choice, in the sense that issues of cost, mobility and cultural capital exclude them from many of the options that might seemingly be available (Ellaway and Macintyre, 2000; Bowyer, et al, 2009).

For those who do experience choice, shopping for food has been found to be very much a social practice, performed according to learned ‘repertoires’ relating to differing combinations of shops, goods and locations (Clarke, et al, 2004). In common with Clawson and Knetsch’s (1971) findings about the components of the ‘leisure experience’, it seems that the practice of food shopping involves five stages, all of which must be considered as part of a person’s repertoire, and all of which have implications for retail location. The stages are:

- Contemplation and planning a shopping trip, involving deciding what is wanted, which shops will have those goods and what other attributes these shops have, including their location relative to other shops or services;
- Travelling from home to the shop(s), whatever the means of transport, noting here that one of the attributes of the chosen shop(s) may be their location relative to a bus route or to suitable car parking;
- Buying the goods, including the ambience of the shop, the demeanour of the staff (Pettigrew, et al, 2005) and the nature of the other customers;
- Returning home, including other stops such as meeting friends, having a cup of tea, or travelling through interesting parts of the town or country (noting here Bowyer, et al’s, 2009, comments about the problems of carrying large amounts of shopping on public transport); and
- Storing the goods at home, preparing and cooking them, eating them, reflecting on the shopping experience, and beginning to plan the next trip (Clarke, et al, 2004).

Very clearly, choice in this context is a much more complex proposition than merely choosing the cheapest or most convenient shop. Indeed, empirical evidence suggests that those on low incomes and with the least mobility – older people without a car, for example – often shop in more expensive and less convenient shops (Bowyer, et al, 2009), and not wholly because they lack physical alternatives.

Thus, in considering retail location it is vitally important to understand the specific social and cultural practices that inform food purchases within any given community. For while it may be the case that the large retailers enjoy considerable power over customers and thus feel that they can locate where it suits them, Clarke (2000) argues that (some) customers also have power, particularly in terms of planning and enacting the social practice of food shopping. While it is generally the case that those customers with money and mobility enjoy the most power, Meneely, et al (2009) found that time is also important, with older retired people willing to commit more time to food shopping, including taking more shopping trips, with more emphasis on the quality of the shopping experience than necessarily on the quality, quantity, origin or price of the food that they are buying (what Beharrell and Denison, 1995, characterise as high involvement in what is more conventionally understood – and experienced - as a low involvement activity). Studying how older and less mobile people negotiate access to food shops can therefore uncover a great deal about the workings of local food retail economies.

Older people and their (lack of) food choice

There is no agreed definition of who is classed as an 'older person'. Convention in the UK has been to use the retirement age as a guide, although the national charity, Age Concern, considers anyone over 50 may be classed as 'older'. For Mathur and Moschis (1999), it is important to understand that the elderly population is heterogeneous, and that socialisation into older age tends to matter more than age itself, with socialisation understood as the processes by which individuals acquire the knowledge and skills to enable them to participate in society as they age. In contrast to children, who have fairly proscribed socialisation processes, it is apparent that this is not necessarily the case in later life:

Social norms for roles performed in old age are not as explicit [as for younger age groups] and the socialization processes are not clearly specified. The notion of the elderly as isolated individuals suggests that there are no norms for old age and that older people develop their own norms as they age (Mathur and Moschis, 1999: p.165)

Empirically, as people get older, they tend to face increasing constraints in gaining access to certain goods and services. One such good is healthy food (Food Standards Agency, 2010) which has become a key policy concern in many countries (Community Food and Health Scotland, 2010), driven by a mix of ethics (Morgan's, 2010, 'progressive narrative of care') and pragmatism (Howell's, 2008, recognition that addressing the health needs of the most vulnerable will benefit all sections of society). As Community Food and Health Scotland (2010) recognise, there are numerous potential constraints to older people accessing healthy food which, if addressed, would – by implication - benefit others (see also Bowyer, et al, 2009). These fall into two broad categories: poverty - the costs of food, transport and personal health; and culture (or socialisation) - differential culinary skills and shopping practices (see Keane and Willetts, 1994; Herne, 1995; Donkin, et al, 1998; Hare, et al, 1999; Hughes, et al, 2004). In addressing these constraints, Morgan (2010) argues in favour of a pluralist approach to food planning in which the ecological integrity of healthy food and the social justice of its distribution are combined in a comprehensive approach to food security. Allied to this are suitable support services for vulnerable people, such as the elderly, to ensure their continued access to healthy food as their life circumstances change (Herne, 1995; Richards and Robertson, 2008; Dunstan and Williams, 2008).

Yet, in offering confirmation of Clarke, et al's (2004) arguments about the 'experience' of food shopping, research by Wilson, et al (2004) found that changes in the physical location and accessibility of food shops did not, on their own, have an effect on dietary variety. Dietary issues related to gender and ethnic identities are certainly important here (Beardsworth, et al, 2002; Bowyer, et al, 2009). However, what Wilson, et al's research indicated was that, to a greater or lesser extent, even older and more vulnerable people can develop coping strategies to ensure that

they retain access to suitable foods, even when confronted with local 'food deserts' (Clarke, et al, 2004; Guy, et al, 2004; Hollingsworth, 2004). This led Wilson, et al (2004) to suggest that there is a level of complexity to access factors (and thus choice) that has yet to be fully understood, certainly for a proportion of the older population.

While offering a strategic agenda for spatial and service planning, therefore, the current spatial emphasis on food distribution risks missing the agency that individuals bring to their everyday practices of sourcing food. This is not to deny that many people are constrained in their choices (or effectively do not experience choice), but to recognise that people routinely develop practices for negotiating their ways around constraints (see Kay and Jackson, 1991, with respect to leisure practices). Developing a better understanding of these agentic practices could provide a significant input to local and regional food planning. It could, furthermore, help deconstruct understandings of the 'local' with respect to food, to generate new knowledges about how, and in what circumstances, people deploy choice over what food they buy. It can also help develop an understanding of how people choose where they shop, which is significant for generating policies that can influence local food production and consumption.

Data collection

Brighton & Hove, in South East England, is a relatively compact city of a quarter of a million inhabitants. It is well served by public transport and has much higher levels of people walking to work than many other urban areas of its size (Brighton & Hove Strategic Partnership, 2009). The city is characterised by substantial social and cultural contrasts across its urban area, with some residents enjoying high levels of social and cultural capital while others experience high levels of economic and social exclusion. According to the Index of Multiple Deprivation 2007 (Department of Communities and Local Government, 2007), Brighton & Hove is amongst the 25% most deprived

authorities in England, with 15 areas of the city ranked within the top 10% nationally for multiple deprivation. Those living in the most deprived parts of the city have a life expectancy of five years less than those in the affluent areas (Brighton & Hove City Primary Care Trust, 2008). The contrasts in food consumption are equally marked, with over half of the population eating less than the Government recommended levels of fruit and vegetables (Brighton & Hove Food Partnership, 2006). This is, in part, because most fresh food is imported into the city, with little food for local consumption grown in the city and few successful outlets for fresh regional food, either through shops, markets or via restaurants (Food Matters, 2003). The City has a food strategy and action plan (Brighton & Hove Food Partnership, 2006) which seeks to encourage local food growing and consumption within a sustainable food system. This is seen as integral to wider policies related to community cohesion, inclusion and safety and is supported by a National Lottery-funded initiative to encourage more people in Brighton & Hove to grow and consume locally-grown fresh food (Brighton & Hove City Council, 2006; Harvest Brighton & Hove, n.d.). Allied to supermarkets located in a range of central and suburban areas, the city does not experience food deserts of the sort highlighted by Clarke, et al (2004) and Wilson, et al (2004).

Older people are one of the target groups for Harvest Brighton & Hove, in an attempt to improve their health through better access to fresh food and by encouraging more of them to become active through gardening. As the pilot stage in a process of getting to understand better the needs of older people in Brighton & Hove, a single focus group was organised through the local branch of the national charity Age Concern. Recruitment of focus group members took place at the charity's day centre in Brighton, with no stipulation about who was eligible, other than that they were at least 50 years old, and thus classified by Age Concern as an 'older person'. The participants were selected through purposive sampling, on the basis that they regularly attended the day centre, expressed an interest in talking about diet and food, and lived on their own in different parts of the City. The focus group took place at the Age Concern day centre in Brighton, on 4th May 2010 and involved 10

participants aged 55-79 years old. Due to the environment in which the focus group took place, the proceedings were noted rather than recorded. This limited the amount of verbatim text, including direct quotes, that could be recorded. The notes were subsequently written up with additional observations added by the convenor. Given that the data related to a single focus group, analysis consisted of deep reading and re-reading the text, making notes about the main points discussed and the ways in which the group had referred to those points. No coding or other form of analysis was undertaken. Where quotes are used, the names of the participants have been anonymised.

Findings

Although few of the group drive or have access to a private car, most shop for food at a variety of shops in a number of locations throughout the city. Typically, they use supermarkets to buy staple foods (including vegetables) and local speciality shops for fresh foods, especially meat, eggs and fish. There is a particular connection, for many, with local butchers' shops, because they appreciate the information that the butchers provide about the meat and how to cook it, they find that supermarket meat lacks taste and texture, and they also prefer not to buy foods (from the supermarkets) that have been wrapped in cellophane. Examples of the comments made include:

"I like that butcher on the corner there ..." (Agnes, aged 70)

"... (yes) ... (he) knows where the meat comes from" (Beryl, aged 79)

There is a general consensus that food doesn't taste as good as it used to (particularly if it has been imported or wrapped in cellophane), and that the choice of foods has declined as the local markets have closed (Beryl, for example, asked "what happened to oxtail?"). Apart from declining food choice, some of the group mentioned that there were good cafes near the markets where they used to meet their friends. Indeed, some of the group still visit a café near the site of the old Lewes Road

market, although the market itself is no longer there. The exception to this buying pattern was one man (Colin aged 72), who only buys convenience foods and always checks to see that it will "... take less than four minutes", as he eats only microwave meals.

The free bus pass available to the elderly, allied to a good bus service throughout the city, has allowed people to shop more frequently in different locations than would otherwise be the case. Indeed, many in the group spoke about how, once they qualified for the bus pass, they were no longer limited by what they could afford in terms of travel, and so could make more trips to favoured locations around the city. For example, Doris, aged 70, claimed that "bus passes have made it easier" to shop around the city. In contrast, those who have cars tend to visit fewer shops, preferring instead to drive to the main supermarkets where parking is free and (relatively) easy. Thus, access to food shops was, for the participants, very much a function of the dominant mode of transport that they use and how close this transport can deliver them to the shops in question. For most, the main constraint is thus the proximity of shops to their favoured bus routes and, then, the distance between bus stops and the shops themselves. For those with cars, the constraints are more about the ease and cost of parking.

Many of the participants supported the idea of buying local fresh food that is in season, largely because they feel that it tastes better and is better for them than food that has been imported. Elsie, aged 69, was critical of supermarket vegetables, stating that "potatoes used to last". Taste (allied to choice) was a major driver in determining where the participants shop for different foods. This meant, however, that none of them were interested in joining box schemes (or other forms of home delivery), explicitly because they do not want food 'forced' on them, but also because it would deprive them of the culture of shopping, which they enjoy:

"Box schemes? I don't know what to do with it ..." (Elsie, aged 69)

Four of the participants grow some of their own vegetables, particularly celery, beans, tomatoes and salad crops. While recognising the taste, health and nutritional value of growing their own, the main reason is that they have 'always' gardened and feel that it is part of what they do and how they use their time. Most of those who do not garden observe that it can be difficult and tiring for older people, while some also claim that they have no need to grow their own because there is a good supply in local shops and they also get given vegetables by neighbours and friends.

Few of the participants felt that they experienced major constraints in their food shopping. While lamenting the decline of a number of markets and local shops, most of them routinely make their way around the city to buy different foods in different shops. They all use the supermarkets, on the basis that these shops offer reasonable staple foods at good prices. They are, nevertheless, critical of the ways in which the supermarkets have reduced choice, freshness and taste, and most have no problem in shopping elsewhere for fresh foods. Interestingly, few of the participants equate the loss of markets and local shops with the growth of the supermarkets, instead seeing them as an entirely different part of the food supply system, aimed at providing value for money bulk foods that they do not see the need to buy elsewhere. Thus, rather than creating barriers or constraints, the supermarkets have added to the city's food offer. Armed with their bus passes, the supermarkets are no more or less accessible than local shops, with many people taking in both during a weekly shopping expedition. Indeed, access constraints are much more likely to be experienced by car drivers, and then to the shops closer to home where parking can be difficult and expensive.

Discussion: implications for food planning and the 'local'

What is immediately clear from the focus group is that those people able to attend the Age Concern day centre do not experience major difficulties in moving around Brighton & Hove. There is a good

bus service that can be used free of charge by those of pension age, and many of the participants make good use of this service to express their food choices. In the main, they do not see this as a problem, but welcome the variety of shopping (and social) experiences available in the city. While broadly consistent with Herne's (1995) review of early literature in the field, this is rather at odds with more recent findings, both in terms of the significance of access to dietary variety, and in terms of the social benefits of shopping. Indeed, far from being a constraint, the differential location of food retailers across the city seemed to legitimise the participants' application of cultural capital to using the buses, sourcing fresh meat, fish, eggs and (sometimes) vegetables and seeking social situations and contact. For many of the participants, this experience could well be equated to the type of 'leisure shopping' that many people only experience when on holiday: the application of time and ingenuity to sourcing specific foods (Powe, 2006).

It is also clear that the key drivers of food choice are related to taste, freshness and price/value, not 'localisation' per se. Most of the participants felt that supermarkets offer a low-price comprehensive, if uninteresting, selection for those who do not want to make multiple visits to shops, or who prefer to drive to a single destination with lots of free parking. The supermarkets are particularly good for bulk items and for convenience foods (the single man who buys only ready meals was very happy with the supermarket that he uses). At the other extreme, local shops offer a personal service, with fresher and more tasty food, although often at higher prices than the supermarkets. Perhaps as importantly as the food, the location of these shops holds cultural significance for many of the participants: the shops are in parts of the city that they know, even if they no longer live there; often these parts of the city have long term associations with food, such as old food markets; and there are cafes and other social attractions nearby. In contrast to the supermarket, which is a trip to buy food, the trip to the local shops is about an affirmation of local knowledge and belonging. The bulk of people's shopping may be done at the supermarket, where food is cheap and convenient, but the additional shopping, in local shops, is what brings pleasure,

even if it costs more and is less convenient. The references that the participants made to the choice of meat cuts available locally, to the food having more taste, and of tasting like it used to, all point to a culture of food shopping that is driven by a virtuous combination of culture and nutrition.

This very much confirms recent literature that has questioned how far 'local' food needs to be made available locally. While the focus group participants liked the idea of eating local food, it was less important to them than the social practice of shopping. Indeed, most of the group did not want food delivered, while a new food outlet that might be close to them physically but was not on their current shopping route held little interest – to use it they would have to alter their travel plans and few saw the need, even if the food is local and fresh. While this response may be specific to this group of people living in this specific location, the general message is sufficiently congruent to findings elsewhere to suggest that it is of more than local interest (see, for example, Ellaway and Macintyre, 2000; Dunstan and Williams, 2008; Bowyer, et al, 2009). And this response suggests that, to be successful, any policy to promote the availability and consumption of fresh local food must start by assessing the culture and spatial practice of food shopping in that town or city. New food distribution that is planned to be in harmony with current cultural practice is more likely to have an impact on diet than similar provision that fails to take into account the reasons that people shop and the places that they visit to do their shopping.

While recognising the limitations of the data provided by 10 people in one location at one time, the findings suggest that there is a significant cultural role to be played in planning food retail and distribution. Rather than concentrate on distance as the principal cipher for accessibility, there is a need to consider two interlocking factors: the routes that people inscribe on the city; and the cultures of the areas (potentially) linked by these routes. In Brighton & Hove, the routes are largely those of the buses while, in addition to the main supermarkets, the key cultural areas for food shopping appear to be specific main roads which have a long term association with markets and

local street culture. The fact that the markets have declined, or moved, is of less concern than the associations that the roads hold for those using them, and the other attractions and services that the roads offer.

Supermarkets certainly have a place within this culture, particularly for those who lack cultural connections to the place that they live, or who have never developed the cultural capital to buy and cook fresh food. Supermarkets are also popular for the purchase of staples and dry goods – items that have traditionally been bought in grocers' stores, where price and convenience are key considerations. But the planning possibilities related to food sales beyond the supermarkets are immense: older people will travel to buy good fresh food, provided that there is suitable transport and that they have cultural connections to the areas in which the food shops are located. While the focus group participants talked predominantly about long term cultural connections, it is equally possible to create new cultural centres – fresh food outlets close to the Age Concern day centre, or the health centre, or the library – to encourage all people to include food shopping as part of their daily activities. In this way, 'local' can take on a new socio-spatial meaning relating to a mix of supply and demand: the place of sale allied to the origin of the food. Just as the participants describe, people will shop for certain fresh foods, if they are available, because these foods taste better and because they can choose the cuts and amounts of food that they want to buy, not what larger shops wish to sell them.

However, what is equally clear is that we should treat with caution ideas about the social and cultural significance of reducing the length of the food supply chain. While there was no particular animosity to the idea of locally-produced food, and some participants spoke with enthusiasm about growing their own, there was little stomach (literally and metaphorically) for the seasonal limitations and dietary restrictions implied by this form of localism (and there were some concerns about the cleanliness of this food, with Fern, aged 75, concerned that she would find slugs in it). There was,

equally, no great enthusiasm for ethical considerations around food. Rather, most of the focus group participants valued the experience of shopping – particularly for fresh meat, eggs and fish - in culturally relevant locations. Beyond the locations themselves, the most important factors in purchase decisions were freshness, taste price and the demeanour of the shop keeper or sales assistant. While locally-sourced food that is ethically and sustainably produced fits well into this scenario, it was not the key motivation that brought the consumers to the shop.

This suggests that local food politics and planning has some way to go to establish its legitimacy as a key area of public policy. It also suggests that claims about the cultural relevance of locally sourced foods may be over-played. This is not to deny the part that they can play in contributing to reducing food desertification and improving localised access to dietary variety. But it is to recognise that, for some people at least, their relevance is in terms of quality, price and accessibility, not local association alone. In planning local food distribution, therefore, there is a need to develop a revised form of food mapping that relates access to established cultural land and cityscapes, and the routes that people use to move between them.

Concluding comments

We have sought, in this paper, to question the construction and meaning of ‘local’, when applied to food. While accepting the theoretical distinction between local sourcing and local distribution, our focus group participants suggested that, for them, the distinction is somewhat esoteric. This is not so much about choice – or the lack of it – as it is about the relative significance they place on the origin of the food vis-a-vis its quality, price and cultural location of sale. For them, increasing the availability of locally-sourced produce, or moving the point of sale for fresh food closer to their homes (recentring the previously decentred food retail) are not enough on their own to necessarily improve access (and, thus, diet). Indeed, such interventions could be irrelevant to people’s cultural

practices, or it may simply mean that those people have to develop new strategies to gain access to the food that they wish to purchase. Rather, what is required is a more thoroughgoing approach to planning access to local food that matches travel routes and physical locations with the cultures and lifestyles of those at whom the provision is intended.

This is not to undermine the value of locally-sourced fresh food, but to place it in the context of the consumption habits of our case study participants. It is very much the case that our participants are interested in having a better supply of local food – and while not being as mobile as younger people with cars, they are mobile enough to access a range of consumption spaces. However, it is equally apparent that their attitude to it is conditioned by wider factors, such as their previous exposure to, and their ability to prepare and cook, fresh food. They are also wary of the emphasis, in many local food initiatives, on growing. This is, in part, about their assessment of their health and physical ability, but it is also about the negative connections that they make with the ‘types’ of people who get involved in such programmes. This also suggests, as Herne (1995) identified some years ago, that there is a need for a form of food education – for all ages – that contextualises food choice and the development of culinary skills within a broader development of cultural awareness and capital – helping people to read and negotiate their way through urban landscapes via food.

But the real message to emerge from the work is not about re-emerging connections between people and the food that is grown locally to them. Rather, it is much more about the part that food shopping plays in the social and cultural life of many older people. This is very much a nuanced message, in which individual socialisation processes (Mathur and Moschis, 1999) are all-important in informing the ways in which people plan and operationalise their shopping and cultural experiences (see Clarke, et al, 2004). Most of our participants did not distinguish between ‘local’ shops and bigger, more distantly located, supermarkets. Instead, they viewed them as part of a ‘food shopping experience continuum’ that allows them to match their shopping requirements to different outlets

in different places. Supermarkets were felt to be suited to repetitive shopping for dry staples and some vegetables. Smaller local shops, especially when situated near bus routes in favoured parts of town, are more favoured for fresh food, especially meat, eggs and fish. And, as Clawson and Knetsch (1971) observed with respect to leisure travel, the experience of shopping, wherever this takes place, is an amalgam of planning, travelling, buying and recollecting, often involving social interaction with others, whether friends or strangers.

To our participants, therefore, there is no such thing as finite and spatially referenced food areas or deserts (recognising here that Brighton & Hove are well enough served by food shops not to experience any severe 'food desertification'). This is not to say that there are not areas of town where there are few, if any, food shops. Rather, most of our participants described the routes and nodes that make up their food maps – the metaphor of oasis is appropriate here - in describing specific shopping locations linked (mainly) by bus routes. There is no explicit reference to the areas surrounding the oases, but the point is that the domain response to food shopping in Brighton & Hove is to accentuate the possibilities, not the constraints. Quite clearly, any attempt to locate a new food outlet in Brighton & Hove, especially one emphasising locally sourced food, needs to be aware of the mental food maps referred to by the participants: successful locations are likely to be those already identified as hubs, or oases, even if there are suitable sites or premises closer to people's homes.

More fundamentally, the findings of this work call into question how far messages about the (re)localisation of food and the shortening of the distance between producers and consumers is really penetrating people's lives. Some of the focus group members were aware of initiatives to strengthen the connections between local farmers and growers and those who eat their food. Beyond enjoying access to fresh, tasty meat, eggs and fish, however, the focus group members did not place any particular value on such initiatives: the fact that food has been grown locally is good,

but is not a sufficient reason in itself to buy and consume it, if better alternatives are available that are either cheaper or in locations of cultural significance. And, in this context, 'better' relates as much to the point of sale as to the food itself. While the focus group did not explore the root of this disconnection between policy and practice, it seems quite possible that bringing producers and consumers closer together is not an authentic gesture for many people; their cultural connections are not to farmers and growers, but to areas of the city, shops, shop-keepers, markets and market traders. Bringing more fresh food back to the traditional market areas of the city is, therefore, likely to have a bigger impact on access and consumption than trying to reduce the length of the food supply chain per se. This may seem counter-intuitive to the relocalisation debates that are commonly taking place (Guthrie, et al., 2006).

Yet, what it indicates is that the debates themselves may be missing the point of localisation: that it is, certainly for older people living in urban areas, more about points of sale than it is about points of production. For while the 'green care' of farmers' markets, community growing schemes and the like may be significant for some (see Hegarty, 2007), the socialisation of those in our focus group is much more closely tied to the development of the retail trade. For our group, supermarkets are much more part of the shopping culture than box schemes, grow your own, or membership of a community farm; they are part of a shopping continuum that is defined by produce and point of sale. To make an impact on this culture, therefore, any intervention to encourage people to consume more fresh local food must be located on the continuum; a failure to recognise this will undermine any attempt to plan the local into food distribution, sale and consumption.

In closing, it is important to recognise that the data used in this paper are from a single exploratory focus group and must, therefore, be treated with caution. Brighton & Hove is a relatively small city with a good network of walking and bus routes allied to a strong culture of walking, cycling and taking the bus. It also has a relatively well distributed shopping infrastructure comprising both

supermarkets and small independent food shops. The group members were also relatively fit, mobile and used to travelling around the city. Nevertheless, the findings do suggest that current understandings of the 'local' economy may not take into account all the nuances of culture and that further work could well confirm that a much more complex decision process is in operation with respect to how people may respond to the re-localisation of food.

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