

SEEKING FOOD JUSTICE:
WHY DIGNITY MATTERS

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Abstract: This project expands on existing food justice research through evaluation of the ways in which dignity is related to individuals' food practices and processes. Through the process of exploring daily experiences with food, I discovered that individuals socially construct a sense of dignity through an array of food-related social processes, and as a result of social and structural forces. In light of this discovery, I provide a new theoretical model of the ways that social and structural forces influence individuals' sense of dignity, and offer a new typology of daily experiences of dignity construction within the social hierarchy of food security. Based on data from ethnographic field notes, semi-structured interviews with a sample of thirty-eight participants, and archival data, this research makes an important contribution to the literature on food justice work by exploring the social construction of dignity occurring alongside food experiences. I present evidence regarding how the social hierarchy of food security, maintained through two key aspects of structural inequality, class division and constraints to opportunities, facilitates individuals' daily, lived experiences with food access and foodways. Individuals perceive these daily experiences to either promote or violate their sense of dignity. I organize daily experiences of dignity construction into three distinct social arenas—individual, relational, and institutional. My findings suggest that as a person's position in the social hierarchy of food security rises, so, too, does the likelihood of having daily experiences that positively impact individuals' sense of dignity. The inverse is equally true. Individuals occupying lower positions in the social hierarchy have a higher likelihood of experiencing daily events that negatively impact individuals' sense of dignity. Findings elucidate a new typology of daily experiences of dignity construction within the social hierarchy of food security. The theoretical contributions provided in this paper offer a first step toward achieving a central goal of the food justice movement—restructuring the food system to promote fairness, equality, and a greater sense of dignity for all individuals.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The current food system in the United States leaves basic food needs unmet for many, where access to adequate, culturally appropriate, healthy foods is unequally distributed among social groups due to factors such as residential segregation, poverty, and neighborhood deprivation (Allen 2008; Caruso 2014; Cummins, Flint, and Matthews 2014). Over the last two decades, the United States has experienced an increase in the number of households facing obstacles to achieving food security. The USDA estimates 17 percent of households are food insecure nationally (Coleman-Jensen & Gregory 2014). Food insecurity, defined as “limited or uncertain availability of nutritionally adequate and safe foods or limited or uncertain ability to acquire acceptable foods in socially acceptable ways” (Anderson 1990:120), is perpetuated by growing levels of economic inequality, such as low wages, rising costs of healthcare and housing, inflation, and higher food costs (Berman 2011; Coleman-Jensen & Gregory 2014). In response, the food justice movement has emerged. While multi-dimensional, a central focus of the food justice movement is to emphasize the right to food security as a primary function of a democratic and just society (Wekerle 2004). Thus, the food justice framework strives to

incorporate various means of addressing food insecurity neglected by alternative, market-based approaches—emphasizing cultural relationships with food and the need for a food system to be built on human rights rather than capitalist relations (Anderson and Cook 1999; Buttel 1997; Heynen et al. 2012; Wekerle 2004).

Emphasizing human rights, existing research explores the link between individuals' lack of healthy foods and a wide range of negative health impacts, including higher rates of mortality, morbidity, diet-related diseases, and cancers (Caruso 2014; Raja et al. 2010; Walker, Keane, and Burke 2010). While health impacts are a critical component of individuals' quality of life, food justice advocates argue other components of human rights need to be explored, such as the impact of food insecurity on individuals' sense of dignity. The notion of dignity is implicitly tied to food justice work as it relates to structural inequalities as an impediment to justice; however, dignity as a specific dimension has been largely understudied in food justice research (Bedore 2014; Caruso 2014). In an effort to continue working toward the movement's goals, food justice researchers have called for additional study regarding the critical relationship between dignity and food processes and practices (Bedore 2014; Kato 2013).

This project responds to researchers' calls for additional study through evaluation of the ways in which dignity is related to individuals' food practices and processes. When I first began this research, I sought to understand how individuals' daily, lived experiences with food might affect their sense of dignity. Through the process of exploring daily experiences with food, I discovered that individuals construct a sense of dignity through an array of food-related social processes, and as a result of social and structural forces. In light of this discovery, I developed a new theoretical model of the

ways that social and structural forces influence individuals' sense of dignity (*Figure 1*), and offer a new typology of daily experiences of dignity construction within the social hierarchy of food security (*Figure 3*). I use qualitative methods, including participant observation and semi-structured interviews, to examine a case study of an emerging community-based Food Resource Center (FRC) project in a mid-sized, rural Oklahoma town. The FRC provides a unique opportunity for the study, as one of the primary goals of the center is to enhance or cultivate a sense of dignity throughout the process of food procurement for food insecure community residents. The theoretical contributions provided in this paper offer a first step toward achieving a central goal of the food justice movement—restructuring the food system to promote fairness, equality, and a greater sense of dignity for all individuals.

In the next chapter, I address the pertinent literature regarding the food justice framework and the concept of dignity. Chapter III provides a detailed report of the design of this project, including the context of the case study and the research methodology employed. I offer specifics of the case study being used for this research, and discuss the context of the emergence of the food justice project in the community where this case study is situated. The fourth chapter presents a reflexive perspective, where I discuss my experiences as a researcher in the field, and the ways in which those experiences inform the understanding of the social construction of human dignity that is explored in this paper. Chapters V and VI are dedicated to analysis and findings. The first analysis chapter explores the structural aspects of the social construction of dignity. Looking specifically to forces of structural inequality in the food system and structural violence as prime mediators of individuals' daily experiences with dignity construction, I address the

question—How does structural inequality in the food system influence the social construction of human dignity? The second analysis chapter focuses on daily, lived experiences with food access and foodways. Through the lens of individual participants, I present their perceptions of how food experiences impact their sense of dignity, either positively or negatively, answering the question—How is an individuals' sense of dignity influenced by practices and processes related to food access and foodways? In the final chapter, Chapter VII, I reiterate the main findings of this research and provide a typology of the social construction of dignity in the context of food based on the research findings. Additionally, I discuss the limitations of this study and suggest directions for future research.

CHAPTER II

A REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

To date, food justice research has not explicitly incorporated specific study of the concept of dignity. In the following sections, I review literature on the features and goals of the food justice movement and discuss dignity as a theoretical concept. I begin with an overview of existing literature on food access, sovereignty, foodways, and justice, identifying central narratives in the body of work. I then address classical sociological literature and research found in the long-standing traditions of symbolic interactionism and social psychology to provide a foundation for understanding the broad concept of dignity. Additionally, I look to research in the health field exploring patients' experiences of dignity in relation to seeking healthcare and other social services, which provides preliminary insights into experiences of dignity in the context of issues related to food justice.

FOOD ACCESS, SOVEREIGNTY, FOODWAYS, AND JUSTICE

Three core tenants comprise the basis of food justice work—food access, food sovereignty, and foodways. Alkon and Agyeman (2011) distinguish two core concerns

addressed by the food justice framework—food access and food sovereignty. Food access refers to the production, distribution, and procurement of healthy food; while food sovereignty refers to empowering marginalized communities to regain and manage ownership of their food system. Many food justice scholars emphasize the importance of understanding the distinction between food access and food sovereignty to ground the framework of food justice in a way that can empirically address challenges faced by communities living in poor food environments (Blay-Palmer, Knezevic, and Spring 2014; Gottlieb and Joshi 2010). Alkon et al. (2013) argue that food justice work must take “foodways” into consideration for food system transformation to be successful. “Foodways are the processes involved in the growth, purchase, preparation, consumption, sharing—or absence—of food within communities” (Cannuscio, Weiss, and Asch 2010: 382). Exploring literature regarding each of these core tenants is important as a basis for understanding the overall food justice frame; although, this study will be primarily focused on food access and foodways, specifically.

According to Adams, Ulrich, and Coleman (2010), “accessibility is not the same as availability; they are indicators describing different types of social phenomena” (59). Food justice scholars acknowledge that when it comes to issues of food access, barriers exist to procuring healthy foods other than the far too common, oversimplified analysis of geographic access that is pervasive in food desert research. Impediments to food security include historically racialized spatial contexts, quality of available foods, and economic or financial burdens (Kato 2013). Caruso (2014) found that access to healthy foods can also be stymied by a lack of social capital felt by residents in low-income areas. When it comes to quality concerns, the current global food supply chains have created a food

system where it is possible to procure more calories for less money than ever before; however, the food quality is often quite poor, offers insufficient nutrition, and is highly correlated to nutrient deficiencies and chronic health problems (Morland and Filomena 2007; Nestle 2002). Exacerbating the issue further, global food distribution systems place higher prices on the most nutritious foods, making them economically less accessible for financially strained individuals (Larsen and Gilleland 2009).

Food sovereignty work places the commodification of food in the center of the conversation, arguing it is “undermining freedom and autonomy, independence, and culture in the food system” (Pimbert 2009:3). Researchers argue that hunger and food insecurity are a direct result of structural inequalities developed through urban planning and zoning practices, the inequitable distribution of wealth, and the commodification of food, which is the transformation of food into a commodity or object of trade seen merely as an economic value (Pothukuchi and Kaufman 1999; Power 1999). Food sovereignty advocates claim that food commodification of any kind leads directly to food insecurity, as it drives up the volume of food production, increases the market size, and places all power and control of the food system in the hands of global institutions and firms (Lang 2003). Both producers and consumers experience a loss of power and agency (Goodman & Redclift 1991; Heynen 2012). As a means of reaching an alternative solution to the current food system, which has taken power and control out of the hands of communities and individuals, food sovereignty demands that all people have a right to determine their own food system—one that offers safe, nutritious, culturally appropriate, affordable food (Heynen 2012; Holt-Gimenez and Peabody 2008; Pimbert 2009).

Food is a central component to the development of cultural and individual identities. In accordance, any cultural disconnects between community members within a particular food environment can act as an impediment to creating a more just food system (Alkon and Norgaard 2009). Hauck-Lawson (1998), argues that food itself is a powerful tool for understanding the complexities implicit in both people's individual and cultural identities, and coined the term "food voice" to describe "the dynamic, creative, symbolic, and highly individualized ways that food serves as a channel of communication" (6). Foodways illustrate a conceptual social space where history and culture meet, stressing the "interconnected nature of what it means to dine, cook, share a table, pop in at a grocery store, patronize a local farmers' market, go vegan, boycott a mega-conglomerate, reside in a food desert, read labels, vote this way versus that, and so on" (Young, Eckstein, and Conley 2015: 198). Thus, food must be evaluated as more than a physical dimension; instead, the social, cultural, and emotional aspects of food must be integrated into research as a means for creating effective interventions (Alkon et al. 2013; Cannuscio et al. 2015; Hauck-Lawson 1998).

Food justice aims to ensure "that the benefits and risks of where, what, and how food is grown and produced, transported and distributed, and accessed and eaten are shared fairly" (Gottlieb and Joshi 2010:6), and "places the need for food security in the contexts of institutional racism, racial formation, and racialized geographies" (Alkon and Norgaard 2009:289). The food justice framework considers structural inequality to be a primary impediment to creating a more just food system. Working toward a more democratic and just society by engaging directly with issues of structural inequality, the food justice framework possesses the unique ability to reframe food security as a basic

human right and to offer marginalized groups freedom from exploitation and oppression (Allen 2008; Caruso 2014; Kato 2013; Wekerle 2004). Yet, food justice research has faced some obstacles in this effort (Allen 2008), limited, in part by a lack of research regarding the reciprocal relationship between dignity and food. By neglecting this crucial conversation, this void in research may actually be contributing to the pervasive social narrative, which blames the victim by framing food issues as individual rather than structural and arguing those in poverty are the sole contributing force to their own poor health and nutrition (Bedore 2014; Caruso 2014).

In response, research that considers the role of human dignity in working toward a more just food system must attend to the social forces that have carefully and deliberately designed a structure of inequality; and, in consideration of this inequality, must acknowledge whose dignity is promoted and whose is violated as a result. Farmer (2004) argues the basic ‘structure’ of modern society is characterized by social inequality and the structural violence it precipitates, claiming, “Those who look only to powerful present-day actors to explain misery will fail to see how inequality is structured and legitimated over time” (309). Structural violence, as an indirect force is wielded systemically, rather than individually, and is configured by deeply imbedded social inequalities, which have harmful effects on individuals’ minds and bodies similar to physical violence. In the United States, structural violence is organized along divisions of inequality, such as class, race, gender, and is characterized by arduous social conditions, such as poverty, racism, gender inequality, and food insecurity (Farmer 2004).

FOOD RIGHTS AND DIGNITY

Understanding the relationship between dignity and food must be an integral component of food justice research for any efforts toward reframing food security as a basic human right to be successful. Article 1 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) places dignity at the forefront, declaring “All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights” (United Nations 1948). According to Mann (1998), the UDHR distinguishes dignity as “the prime principle, the wellspring and basis for universal human rights” (31). Undeniably, the esteemed recognition of dignity as the fundamental building block of human rights warrants exploration into the implicit relationship between dignity and food processes and practices in food justice research. Yet, to date, food justice researchers have largely neglected consideration of the concept. In order to develop an empirical understanding of the link between food and dignity, the concept of dignity must first be conceptually refined. As a general notion, dignity has been broadly defined and conceptualized throughout history and across disciplines. Due to the somewhat limited focus on dignity in sociological literature, it is useful to consider the conceptualization of dignity in an interdisciplinary context. Based on a synthesis of existing literature, I review how dignity is defined, how it can be cultivated in individuals, and ways in which it has been previously studied.

In consideration of ethics and morality, many contemporary sociologists tend to defer to the discipline of philosophy; however, classical sociological theorists had much to offer on the notion of dignity and related moral processes. Hodgkiss’ (2013) review of the subject, illustrates both the implicit and explicit ways the ‘founding fathers of sociology,’ Marx, Durkheim, Weber, and Simmel, each in different ways, drew from the likes of Kant, Rousseau, Poudhon, and others to “identify the modern human subject as

the inevitable repository of ‘dignity’— itself the underlying essence of what constitutes ‘the moral’” (Hodgkiss 2013: 418).

For Marx, the discussion of human dignity was most often centered on the inverse concept, indignity, or “the degradation or dehumanization of human beings” (Peffer 1990: 42). Peffer (1990) writes about the inclusion of the concept in Marx’s earliest works, where Marx proclaims in an essay, “Dignity elevates man most, bestows a high nobleness to all his acts, all his endeavors, and permits him to stand irreproachable...a position without dignity lowers us...[In the absence of dignity], the most natural result is self-contempt, and what feeling is more painful?” (Marx, cited in Peffer 1990: 119). Rather than considering dignity as an individualized isolated concept, Marx places dignity at the center of his critiques of capitalism, and argues that capitalist social relations, which deny individuals a certain autonomy and potential for self-actualization, necessitate a violation of individuals’ sense of human dignity.

Durkheim, Weber, and Simmel follow a similar line of thought regarding the social nature of dignity cultivation, each expressing ways in which human dignity can only be realized, lost, preserved, or promoted through social interaction. According to Hodgkiss (2013), “In common with Weber and Simmel, Durkheim stresses autonomy and freedom as being the prerequisites of dignity,” and concludes that, “dignity is itself contingent upon perception of ‘the Other’; it is a property of an inter-subjective dialectic. The individual’s perception of ‘the Other’ impacts on their own self-conception (dignity, thus, becomes a dialectical property)” (430). The premise of this argument indicates how dignity becomes, primarily, a function of social relations. Similarly, for both Weber and Simmel, dignity and honor are components of the development of selfhood, and are

realized through social relationships and interactive comparisons of difference between the self and others (Hodgkiss 430).

Outside of classical sociological theory, human dignity is most often associated with Kant and neo-Kantian philosophy, in which dignity is grounded in human beings' ability to act as moral agents. Theories of human dignity imply that all humans are equally deserving of decent and respectful treatment (Horton 2004; Meyer 1989; Nordenfelt 2004), and provide the basic foundation for recognizing socio-political ideals of equality and justice (Horton 2004; Oyaya & Kaseje 2001). Similar to early sociological theorists, modern philosophers discuss the development of dignity in a social sense, arguing that dignity is contingent and contextual; its value is earned through social interaction, and understood through social behavior (Gewirth 1992; Kolnai 1976; Nordenfelt 2004). Dignity may be earned or lost, promoted or violated. It is contingent on interactions, spaces and historical patterns. As dignity is cultivated through social relations, the nature of dignity is fluid and changeable, yet it is self-defining and formative.

Gewirth (1992) conceptualizes dignity in reference to a sense of self-respect or self-confidence held by individuals. Similarly, Nordenfelt (2004) illustrates dignity as deeply intertwined with self-image. He argues that dignity is not achieved through merit or moral stature, but instead is described as the "dignity of identity...the dignity we attach to ourselves as integrated and autonomous persons" (75). This conceptualization of dignity relates closely to sociologists Berger and Luckmann's (1967) theory of self-production as a social enterprise, positing that dignity always emerges in a social context, and implying that dignity is highly dependent on the traditions and mores of a particular

culture or society. Contingent on the desire to live autonomously and with agency, this type of dignity can be socially altered when a person is prevented from living or acting in ways in which they feel they are entitled (Nordenfelt 2004).

Dignity is also embedded in time and space, and takes into account historical processes and socially earned statuses (Kolnai 1976; Nordenfelt 2004). According to Parr (2000), physical spaces are prime “arenas of identity formation in which individuals come to learn who they are through where they are” (226). Members of marginalized social groups are often confined to spaces that lead to an overall feeling of disenfranchisement and loss of agency. According to Jacobson, Oliver, and Koch (2009), “Economic and social asymmetries are reproduced in the dignity hierarchy of spaces and places. Increasingly, the antipathy of the mainstream toward the body of the despised other sees its expressions in laws and practices regulating access to and the uses of urban spaces and places” (730). In this sense, the ability to act with agency as an integrated and autonomous person is restricted through systematic, spatial oppression.

Other theorists look to the ways in which self-worth and personal value are socially conveyed, focusing primarily on dignity cultivation as the result of interaction and reflection (Mann 1998; Miller & Keys 2001). Sociologist Charles Cooley’s (1902) theory of “the looking glass self” describes this process as a way that individuals develop and understand their sense of worth in relation to an imagination of how others might value their worth. In this way, dignity is the product of social interactions and behaviors that can be either spoken or unspoken. According to Cooley (1922), both feelings of pride and shame are emotions socially determined through an interactive comparison, where self-worth is reflected back to an individual through how they imagine to be perceived by

others. “A self-idea of this sort seems to have three principle elements: the imagination of our appearance to the other person, the imagination of his [sic] judgment of that appearance, and some sort of self-feeling, such as pride or mortification” (184). Dignity can thus be constructed through an unspoken interaction between individuals. Jacobson et al. (2009) note that dignity can also be established through more explicit interactions, where individuals receive either positive or negative verbal or physical responses from others during interactions. In a study of homeless street people, Snow and Anderson (1987) find that individuals in lower ranks of status systems attempt to protect or enhance their sense of self-worth and dignity by displaying certain identity characteristics during social interactions. Similarly, Miller and Keys (2001) found that a sense of dignity was either ‘validated’ or ‘invalidated’ for homeless individuals based on specific types of social interactions and environmental events.

An individual’s sense of dignity is not only developed through social interactions between individuals, but also through individuals’ connections and relationships to the spaces they inhabit, including institutions or other social environments (Miller and Keys 2001; Nordenfelt 2004). According to Jacobson et al. (2009), institutions may exist for the purpose of distributing resources, “but the bureaucratic processes of application for and reception of these resources often are not designed to protect supplicants’ feelings of worth or value” (728). Seltser and Miller (1993) find that excessive rules and regulations at homeless shelters promote a general sense that homeless individuals can’t be trusted to manage their own lives or make their own decisions, leading those who rely on social assistance to feel incapable or unworthy of self-determination. Moreover, physical spaces impact the cultivation of dignity through an individual’s comparative understanding of

the spaces they inhabit in contrast to the spaces inhabited by others (Waldron 1991). In a study of low-income individuals seeking healthcare, Jacobson et al (2009) found that when people perceive themselves to be on the wrong side of certain spatial boundaries, such as living in low-income or environmentally degraded areas, they tend to see themselves as having crossed into personally debasing spaces. These socio-spatial stigmatizations, as theorized by Erving Goffman (1963) can cause severe disjunctions between an individual's self-concept and their social identity; which, in turn, leads to a sense of dignity loss.

Divisions between social classes, legitimated through the use of status symbols and symbolic consumption, also serve in the construction of dignity. In a study of welfare recipients, Rogers-Dillon (1995) found that the stigma attached to using welfare assistance is “produced in the interaction of situation, social audience, and the recipient's life history” (453), and had a significant effect on individuals' sense of identity and self-worth. According to Goffman (1951), “status symbols visibly divide the social world into categories of persons, thereby helping to maintain solidarity within a category and hostility between different categories” (294). As a type of status symbol, class symbols are functions that identify the social class status of the person who displays it for the purpose of social valuation of that person. “On the whole, then, class symbols serve not so much to represent or misrepresent one's position, but rather to influence in a desired direction other persons' judgment of it” (Goffman 1951: 297). A sense of dignity, then, is constructed through the process of social valuation and judgment based on one's class status through the use of symbolic presentation of one's self. In addition, Veblen's (1899/2009) *Theory of the Leisure Class* proposes that consumers engage in buying

practices that display their wealth and relative social status through a practice termed “conspicuous consumption.” This comparative, visual consumption of goods is a key contributing factor to an individual’s cultivation of dignity, as one’s social status becomes defined on the basis of who consumes, or has access to, what type(s) of goods. In accordance with this theory, one study of welfare beneficiaries concluded that individuals’ identities and sense of dignity were cultivated based on the level of social inclusion they felt, provided by the type and amount of assistance they received and the goods that assistance allowed them to purchase (Sykes et al. 2015).

A leading health researcher who studies dignity construction in relation to patients seeking care emphasizes the importance of studying dignity encounters. She defines dignity encounters as any human interaction “in which dignity comes to the fore and may be either violated or promoted” (Jacobson 2009). She argues that dignity violation occurs when there is an asymmetrical social interaction, in which one person is in a position of vulnerability, and the other is in a position of antipathy or disregard. Additionally, dignity violation is inherently tied to an order of inequality, materializing in racism, sexism, or spaces of abundant economic inequality. As Jacobson et al. (2009) discovered in the study of marginalized populations in Toronto, many residents reported experiencing a compromise of their dignity during daily social interactions in their quest for basic resources. “Poor people and people who are otherwise socially marginalized are placed in vulnerable positions by the structurally mediated depth of their needs (dependence) and the extent to which their access to resources is both geographically and politically limited (deprivation)” (Jacobson et al. 2009). In contrast, she argues that dignity promotion occurs through encounters where one actor possesses self-confidence or self-assurance, is

hopeful, and experiences a sense of worthiness, while the other actor holds a position of compassion or supportive empathy. Dignity promotion is often likely to occur when the relationship between the two social actors is one of solidarity, or mutual trust. Unlike social settings associated with dignity violation, which are characterized by harsh circumstances and rigid hierarchies, optimal settings for dignity promotion offer accessibility and transparency, promote friendliness and present a calm environment (Jacobson 2009; Jacobson et al. 2009).

An inter-disciplinary body of literature reveals the multi-dimensional nature of the concept of dignity. Although an initial theoretical framework for this project was provided through a synthesis of existing dignity literature, a more distinct theoretical understanding of the concept was developed as the qualitative research process unfolded. I discovered human dignity can be more accurately understood as a social condition than individual trait; a web of social processes that are continuously woven into the overall fabric of the human condition. Dignity is cultivated, constructed, preserved, violated, and lost through a series of social phenomena that can be no more easily disentangled than those inherent in any other social condition. Based on existing literature and emerging research-based concepts, I consider dignity to be related to positive feelings of pride, empowerment, honor, self-respect, self-identity, and self-worth; as well as negatively regarded feelings of shame, worthlessness, rejection, disregard, dehumanization, self-deprecation, and dishonor. Dignity is cultivated through human connection and social integration, and perhaps, most importantly, it is recognizable in the core of individual identity.

Researchers argue, restructuring the social order at a societal level to promote fairness and equality “requires a theory of justice that privileges dignity as one of its guiding principles” (Horton 2004:1084; also see Oyaya and Kaseje 2001). Exploring the ways in which individuals experience dignity construction through daily food experiences is vital to understanding how food justice work can reframe food security as a basic human right, and improve access to healthy, affordable, culturally appropriate foods for all individuals. By establishing an empirically driven framework of food and dignity, food justice work can successfully propel food security toward ameliorative policy action, which may be critical to achieving food equality. Therefore, this study aims to better understand the relationship between food practices and processes and the social construction of dignity for individuals. This paper will address the following research questions: How does structural inequality in the food system influence the social construction of human dignity? How is an individual’s sense of dignity influenced by practices and processes related to food access and foodways?

CHAPTER III

RESEARCH DESIGN

As part of a community-based research project, data for this manuscript was collected through a series of qualitative methods, including participant observation at local food pantries, community meal-sites, and community-organized meetings, and face-to-face semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders, volunteers, and users of community food programs. I began collecting field notes and interviews in May of 2016 after securing Institutional Review Board approval [IRB #AS-16-55] (*See Attachment C: IRB Approval Page*), and concluded data collection in August of 2017. The initial start date for data collection was chosen based on a need expressed by community organizers involved in the developing food justice project. In the following sections, I provide details related to the case study that was used in this research, as well as the methodology employed in data collection and analysis.

FRC DEVELOPMENT: A CASE STUDY

The case study used for this research project is centered in a mid-sized, rural, college town in Oklahoma, where a group of community leaders and volunteers have

spent several years developing a food and resource center (FRC), alleviating higher than average levels of food insecurity in the area. Food insecurity, whereby individuals are unable to obtain sufficient amounts of nutritionally adequate food, is prevalent in the state of Oklahoma, where 17 percent, or 656,000 individuals are food insecure, and 24 percent of households with children are food insecure (USDA ERS 2015). As a response, several projects designed to alleviate food insecurity and restore marginalized communities' rights to healthy, nutritious, and affordable food have emerged in Oklahoma. Designed as FRC's, these projects emerge as collaborations between local-level community leaders and the Regional Food Bank of Oklahoma. While traditional commodity and distribution methods have historically been the most widely used strategies in Oklahoma, emerging FRC endeavors take a food justice approach.

The county where this case study is centrally located is consistently ranked in the top five counties for rates of food insecurity in the state of Oklahoma, with a rate that averages around 20% of the population (USDA ERS, 2015). Additionally, according to USDA measures, most of the county is situated in a food desert, meaning a large share of residents have limited access to healthy foods due to inequalities related to race/ethnicity, income, or lack of transportation. Historically, food assistance in the area has been characterized by a disjointed and inefficient approach to addressing food insecurity. Although several organizations and agencies, including churches and service organizations, have sought to improve food access for under-resourced residents over the last decade, many of these programs operated with severely restricted hours of access, with some available only one or two days a month. The programs were spread out across the county, making transportation to each location a struggle. The existence of multiple

locations to provide food assistance in the community also resulted in each program having a lower amount of food and other basic resources to offer individuals than what is needed. Overall, the lack of collaboration and communication between the organizations often led to a system of food assistance that was insufficient in providing the basic resources needed by individuals in the community.

Upon recognition of this inefficiency and inadequacy in the area, in terms of addressing the high levels of food insecurity, a group of community leaders partnered with the Regional Food of Oklahoma to develop an FRC as a remedy to the issues posed by the existing food system in the community. One of over a dozen such centers in Oklahoma, the intention of this FRC is to make food resources more widely accessible and available to under-resourced community members. By combining resources from multiple community programs, the FRC can offer the community a more centralized and efficient form of food assistance. Using a food justice framework, members of the community assembled a coalition of food pantries, community, civic and faith-based organizations to tackle issues of food insecurity through the implementation of vastly different strategies than those used in traditional food pantry/bank structures. By engaging with local food partners to support sustainable food access initiatives, as well as offering educational programming to community recipients and a greater variety of food choices, their intent is to restore dignity to the process of food procurement for under-resourced individuals.

Many of the leaders in this project report that the early stages of development moved slowly over a period of several years. At the beginning of 2016, the project began to gain traction in the community, as the emerging organization obtained a building to

lease, provided by the city at the cost of \$1 per year, and the organizational board and other committees began to form. At this time, leaders of the organization made contact with individuals at my university, requesting researchers' involvement with the project as it progressed toward the goal of becoming a fully operational FRC. With dignity promotion as a primary goal of the organization, the development and emergence of this FRC provided the opportunity to use a collaborative, community-engaged research approach to explore the ways in which dignity is impacted by food processes and practices. Research questions were derived from conversations with primary organizational actors, as well as through participant observation as the project unfolded. I disengaged from data collection in August 2017, during the FRC's final stages of development. Interviews thus reflect respondent impressions and assessments prior to the FRC's opening, taking advantage of enhanced community conversations as the area prepared for changes that might occur due to the FRC's emergence as an emergency and supplemental food provider. As of September 2017, the FRC is fully operational, providing food and other basic resources to members of the community.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study is based on data from ethnographic field notes, semi-structured interviews with a sample of thirty-eight participants (*See Attachments A/B: Semi-Structured Interview Guides*), and archival data, such as organizational documents and recorded videos provided by the FRC board members. I employed purposeful sampling based on the research questions and theoretical rationale from existing literature. All participants for the study fell into one of two categories and meet criteria as specified: 1)

Individuals over the age of eighteen, working in the broad arena of food support (e.g., board members of local food/poverty initiatives, employees and board members of local food pantries and resource centers, and volunteers with community assistance organizations); 2) Individuals over the age of eighteen, living with food insecurity (e.g., those who self-identify as marginalized members of their local food environment, those who are food insecure or experience issues related to low food access, or those who qualify for, and have used, food assistance through government or community programs). Interviews were conducted in two distinct phases, distinguished by the above-mentioned criteria. A phased approach to data collection was employed for two specific reasons. First, data gathered from *Phase One* interviews was used, in part, to inform the interview guide for *Phase Two* participants. Second, interviewing organizational actors and community leaders prior to interviewing *Phase Two* participants, which are considered to be a vulnerable population, allowed the opportunity to become familiar with the community and gain the trust of community members.

Phase One participants are drawn from a snowball sample, primarily recruited through a referral system in which stakeholders participating in community food initiatives act as key informants to reveal connections to others involved with community food-work. *Phase Two* participants are comprised of an availability sample. Participants in this phase were primarily recruited by word of mouth, invitation, and recruitment flyers (*See Attachment D: Recruitment Flyer*). Due to the nature of the qualifying criteria for *Phase Two* participants, a compensatory gift of \$20.00 was offered for their volunteered time. Although the study aimed for equal representation between the two groups, and a diverse and representative sample of the greater population, there were

some limitations due to a somewhat small pool of local respondents qualifying for *Phase One*, and the self-identifying, voluntary nature of *Phase Two* interview subjects. The demographics of participants, broken down according to interview phases can be found in Table 1.

Table 1. Descriptives of Full Interview Sample

Phase One Participants; N=20		Phase Two Participants; N=18	
Demographic	Number of Participants	Demographic	Number of Participants
<u>Sex</u>		<u>Sex</u>	
Male	12	Male	7
Female	8	Female	11
<u>Race/Ethnicity</u>		<u>Race/Ethnicity</u>	
White	20	White	11
Black	-	Black	3
Native American	-	Native American	1
Hispanic	-	Hispanic	2
N/A	-	N/A	1
<u>Age</u>		<u>Age</u>	
25—35	1	25—35	4
36—45	3	36—45	3
46—55	6	46—55	6
56—65	3	56—65	2
66—75	5	66—75	1
76—85	1	76—85	1
N/A	1	N/A	1
<u>Education</u>		<u>Education</u>	
Less than High School	-	Less than High School	1
High School Diploma	1	High School Diploma	6
Some College	3	Some College	7
Bachelor's Degree	6	Bachelor's Degree	2
Graduate Degree	10	Graduate Degree	1
N/A	-	N/A	1
<u>Income Level</u>		<u>Income Level</u>	
Less than \$15,000	-	Less than \$15,000	10
\$15,000-\$29,999	1	\$15,000-\$29,999	6
\$30,000-\$44,999	-	\$30,000-\$44,999	2
\$45,000-\$59,999	2	\$45,000-\$59,999	-
\$60,000-\$74,999	-	\$60,000-\$74,999	-
\$75,000-\$89,999	3	\$75,000-\$89,999	-
\$90,000-\$100,000	3	\$90,000-\$100,000	-
More than \$100,000	10	More than \$100,000	-
N/A	1	N/A	-

All interviews were conducted in safe spaces, such as conference rooms on the university campus, privately reserved rooms at the local library, or other similar spaces agreed upon by the participant and the interviewer. Informed consent was sought for all interview participants, and full information outlining the study and their involvement in it was provided. Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed clean-verbatim.

Due to a lack of existing research concerning the link between dignity and food justice, the approach in this study is largely inductive. As part of a larger project, the interview guide was designed broadly to elucidate concepts related to organizational development and the community food environment, and to approach central themes of dignity through a series of questions that draw out participants' key memories, practices, and experiences with food, and encouraged further exploration into individuals' feelings associated with issues of food access, food sovereignty, and foodways. Studying the ways in which dignity is constructed through a food justice lens requires an inherently personal approach; one that allows a researcher to delve into an individual's understanding and interpretation through lived experiences. In using semi-structured interviews for this study, personal perspectives and emotions were elicited to gain a deeper understanding of this proposed relationship.

Data was analyzed using NVivo 11. I employed a qualitative content analysis (QCA) strategy as defined by Schreir (2012). Codes were generated through a part data-driven and part concept-driven process. Through the use of open coding and memo-writing, theoretically-driven concepts were identified from the data and coded into the core category, or 'node' of "Dignity". Based on existing literature, narratives were coded into the category of "Dignity" if they centered on either positive connotations related to

dignity, such as pride, empowerment, self-identity, self-worth, or honor; or, if they centered on negative connotations related to dignity, such as shame, worthlessness, insignificance, disenfranchisement, dehumanization, self-deprecation, or dishonor. All of the data within the “Dignity” node was analyzed using a line-by-line coding strategy, and exhaustively coded into mutually exclusive sub-categories based on emerging conceptualizations of dignity construction occurring in varying social arenas.

I read and coded all transcripts, with a portion of transcripts coded by an additional researcher, independently, to ensure inter-coder reliability. Key themes and conceptual categories were agreed upon through discussions and analysis of the transcripts. Furthermore, as suggested by Corbin and Strauss (2015), the transcripts and findings were returned to all participants as a means of validating assessments.

Participants were offered the opportunity to release their audio-recorded interviews to be housed with the Oklahoma Oral Histories Project at Oklahoma State University’s Edmon Low Library, where the interviews and transcripts will be accessible to the public, as well as for future research. Clean verbatim extracts from the interview transcripts are presented in the paper to illustrate findings.

CHAPTER IV

INTERROGATING “WHY DIGNITY MATTERS”: REFLECTIONS FROM THE RESEARCHER

Before I can present the analysis portion of this study, it is critically important to discuss my role as a qualitative researcher in this project, to shed light on the ways that my integration into this community and the interactions with people in it has privileged my own understanding of dignity in the context of food, and to reveal the unexpected ways that this project has changed me as both a researcher and a person. I began this research because I was bewildered by the lack of exploration in sociological studies of the concept of dignity; specifically, in the realm of studies with a social justice orientation. Believing it was an important piece of the puzzle for sociologists to consider when exploring daily experiences across a spectrum of injustices, I sought to understand how individuals cultivated their own sense of dignity through food practices and processes. Eighteen months later, I have come to the conclusion that dignity is not an important *piece* of the puzzle, but is instead the box which contains all the pieces.

Arguably naive, I began studying human dignity as if it were an individual aspect or trait of the human condition. I have discovered human dignity is not an individual state

or an aspect of human life that can be studied as a singular entity, nor is it easily operationalized or quantifiable. Perhaps, that is why it is so understudied. In all of its complexities, I argue human dignity is, at its core, a concept worthy of sociological consideration. It is important to discuss my role as a qualitative researcher in this project, because I have arrived at this understanding of human dignity through a number of deeply personal interactions and ethnographic experiences in the field. I began this research by asking questions like, “How do you think dignity might be tied to food?” or “How was your sense of dignity affected by [insert any number of experiences]?” I soon realized that no single answer to such an explicit and oversimplified line of questioning would be able to fully encapsulate the idea of human dignity. Becoming frustrated by the lack of richness and inability to obtain a deeper understanding of the concept, I restructured my field notes to consider not only the external experiences I had in the research field, but also the ways in which I was affected internally as a researcher and a person.

Reviewing and analyzing my field notes, I was awe-struck as I realized the ways in which I was cultivating my own sense of dignity throughout the research process. Following a two-hour interview, I sat at a participant’s kitchen table, drinking a hot mug of tea that had been tediously and carefully prepared for me and enjoying what might be the best tasting banana bread I have ever eaten, fresh out of the oven and “baked with love” as his wife told me, and I wrote this,

I am overwhelmed by how comfortable and at-home I feel here, with these people I hardly know. This banana bread is FANTASTIC, and I must have mentioned that out loud a dozen times because his wife just brought me the recipe. I don’t have the heart to tell her I’m a terrible baker, and will likely ruin the bread if I try this at home. [The participant] goes on to tell me a story about how this banana bread was the first thing his wife learned to cook when they married decades ago. They both share memories with me from that time, and he brags about how great her banana bread is. His wife says, ‘It’s really simple!’ and assures me I can handle it. He jokes about

how long the interview took, and we both agree that we are having more fun now that we are just 'hanging out'.

After leaving their home, I pulled over in the nearest parking lot and wrote my final thoughts,

I was worried I had worn out my welcome, so I started packing up my things to leave. His wife brings me a full bag of banana bread, and tells me she had set it back for her husband, 'But I think you'll enjoy it more.' I'm just really surprised by how connected I feel to these people, and I think it's because they were so willing to share their home, their food, and their stories with me. And, thanks to her confidence and coaching, I'm actually excited to go home and attempt to make this bread. Overall, I just feel really great. They both hugged me when they said 'Goodbye' and told me to come back any time. I really want to.

Weeks passed before I revisited these field notes, but as I read through them I was able to begin piecing together the richer understanding of human dignity I had been searching for. The whole experience of that day, the personal interactions and feelings of connection and the pride with which he prepared my tea and she baked the bread, was rife with human dignity. It was at this point that I started to recognize dignity as an intricate social process, rather than a simplified aspect of the individual.

Recognizing human dignity as a social condition that is cultivated through social processes had a profound effect on the way I conducted this research, ultimately shifting the way I handled interviews and interacted with others in the field. After my first interview with an individual who struggles with food insecurity, I noted,

Moving into Phase Two interviews, I've noticed some major differences between the two phases. I asked if her family preferred to eat dinner at the table and she told me they didn't own a table because they can't afford one. I need to stop phrasing questions in ways that presume tables and other basic food resources are necessities, and recognize those things as a privilege. I feel worried that the way I presented that question made her feel, somehow, 'less than'. I also felt uncomfortable with some of the language I used in my interview guide, which didn't feel problematic in Phase One. For instance, I have questions listed on the guide regarding periods of her life where she's experienced 'food insecurity.' Using 'food insecurity' sounds more like a policy discussion than a personal, every day, lived experience. How did I not catch how dehumanizing that is when I wrote this interview guide? Where is the dignity in that?

As academics and researchers, it is important to be cognizant of how our research processes and interactions with participants cultivate dignity in certain ways. There is a

tendency among academic researchers to favor rigorous processes over personalized approaches; but, especially in circumstances of interrogating social injustices, it is vital that we consider dignity cultivation as part of the research process. Otherwise, we risk dehumanizing participants by turning their lived experiences into ‘concepts’ or ‘topics’ to study.

Within the academic world, there is a tendency in our manuscripts and publications to ignore discussions of how our personal worldview, can, and does, profoundly affect the research process, or how our role as a researcher impacts the research that we do. To attend to this, we must be willing to confront and present our own biases, and to recognize how our privilege affects every part of the process, from the way that we construct interview questions, to the interactions we have with participants and in the field. My training and education in sociology has taught me to confront ideas of privilege and inequality in everyday life. Yet, I was surprised by how easily I missed instances of my own privilege that trickled into my research and materialized in ways that on the surface seem like minor details, but at a deeper level had an earnest impact on this project.

When I first began going to local food pantries and community dinners, it was quickly brought to my attention that everything from my shoes to my hairstyle were indicators of my social status and set me apart from everyone else in the field as “the Other,” even though I had made an effort to downplay my appearance by dressing casually. Even the social status of my identity as a researcher and an academic, who is privileged to attend and be educated at a university, had an effect on who was willing to talk to me and what they were willing to say. This was mentioned to me during several

encounters in the field. Following one such conversation with an older man in the community who has lifelong experiences of homelessness and bouts of hunger, I noted,

He mentioned that many of his friends who use food assistance programs in the area didn't want to speak with me or do an interview because they didn't fully trust how the interviews would be used, and couldn't tell 'whose side I was on.' What struck me the most in this conversation was that he made it very clear that I shouldn't take it personally. 'It's not about you, specifically,' he said, 'It's because of the chair you're sitting in.' He talked about how people 'in his community' (referring to other individuals in the area who struggle with being under-resourced) have a hard time trusting any of us 'university people.' He told me he felt very strongly about wanting to do an interview with me because in the ten years he had been involved in some way with food pantries, this was the first time anyone has shown interest in hearing 'their' side of the story, or their issues and concerns.

In this project, I worked to remedy these issues by restructuring my research methods through the lens of my participants. I asked participants for suggestions and guidance concerning the way I conducted interviews and the questions that I asked. I had discussions with individuals in the field about their issues and concerns related to food access and the new center being developed in their community. I took notes of their questions, relayed these questions to community organizers and leaders in the developing organization, and returned to these individuals with answers. I also invested time in connecting with them on a more personal level, something I had not anticipated as being a necessary component of my role as a researcher. Yet, it was vital in this project, because cultivating these relationships provided me with the rich data and personal insights that have guided my understanding of human dignity within the context of food justice.

My experiences led me to the realization that it is impossible to remove human relationships from the qualitative research process. When participants were interested, we spent time together after the formal interviews concluded. We went for walks together. We ate dinner together. They welcomed me into their homes, and they introduced me to their families. I found that a reciprocity of vulnerability elevated both of our sense of

dignity during interactions with one another. So, on numerous occasions, I cried with them as they struggled to share intimate and vulnerable details of their lives, and I shared details about myself and my life when asked. These relationships that were built through the research process brought expectations of solidarity and advocacy. I asked a mother of four, who struggles daily to access enough food for her family, if she felt like anyone was advocating for her. She responded, “Absolutely not. Because, if they had, then you wouldn’t need to fight so hard to try and make the situation better for people like us.” Through the reciprocity of the research process and the relationships that formed as a result, I am encouraged to be an advocate, to show up when necessary, and to produce work that will make their valuable voices heard.

On a personal level, the experiences and relationships I have gained through this research process have impacted my life and changed me in ways that I did not expect. Whether intentionally to maintain a level of objectivity or inadvertently, ethnographies and research manuscripts often fail to acknowledge how engaging in this type of research can personally impact the researcher. Ignoring that aspect of the process is detrimental to this line of work. If we are to acknowledge our own standpoint and worldview as researchers when we enter the field of study, it should be equally important, then, to discuss how those things might have shifted as a result of becoming emerged in the lived realities of others. In my case, these changes are increasingly apparent in my daily experiences with food. In the last year, it has become common practice to swap recipes and cooking tips with my participants, and so my cooking repertoire has expanded tremendously. Even something as mundane as boiling potatoes or baking banana bread, (which I have still yet to master), fills my kitchen with aromas, connecting me to others

and reminding me of the human dignity that has been cultivated and reproduced through our exchanges. In grocery stores and farmer's markets, I am reminded of the intricate structural inequalities complicit in the food system, and my embeddedness within that structure. Importantly, I now view the contents of my grocery cart through the lens of my participants, recognizing the bag of apples not as a necessity, but as a privilege.

I am grateful for individuals' willingness to engage in this process with me. It is my hope that by sharing their perspectives, we can begin to move forward with a deeper understanding and recognition of why dignity matters. In the analysis that follows, I will present narratives from interviews and interactions with individuals in the community. Through their perspective, I will explore the social construction of dignity in the context of food processes and practices, and will address two specific research questions—How does structural inequality in the food system influence the social construction of human dignity? How is an individuals' sense of dignity influenced by practices and processes related to food access and foodways? It should be noted that in my analysis, the social construction of dignity does not refer to a 'social construction' in the traditional sociological sense that it is a socially defined concept, subject to a change in its definition over time and across cultures. Instead, I use the phrase "socially constructed" to reinforce the notion that human dignity is a social condition that can only be recognized and constructed within a social context and as a result of social processes.

CHAPTER V

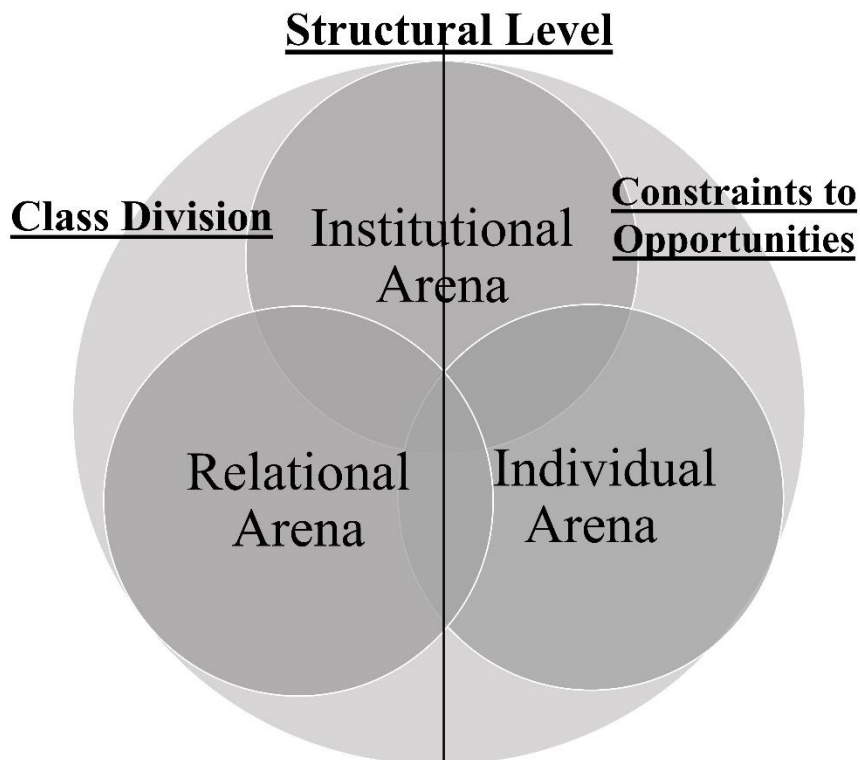
FORCES OF STRUCTURAL INEQUALITY AND THE SOCIAL HIERARCHY OF FOOD SECURITY

A core principle of food justice work considers food security and its inverse, insecurity, to be inherently tied to an order of inequality. At a structural level, this order of inequality exists as a social hierarchy, where individuals occupying higher positions of the hierarchy experience food *security*, and those who occupy lower positions in the hierarchy suffer deleterious effects of food *insecurity*. The purpose of this research is to contribute to food justice work by exploring the social construction of dignity through individuals' daily, lived experiences with food access and foodways, with the goal of working toward a more just food system that promotes a sense of dignity for all individuals. To do so, it is critical to explore not only individuals' daily experiences of dignity construction, but also the stratification of structural inequality, illustrated by the social hierarchy of food security, which predisposes individuals to a certain set of daily life experiences.

In this analysis chapter, I present evidence regarding how the social hierarchy of food security, maintained through two key aspects of structural inequality—class

division and constraints to opportunities—facilitates individuals’ daily, lived experiences with food access and foodways. In the next chapter, I show how individuals perceive these daily experiences to impact, either positively or negatively, a sense of dignity. Individuals’ daily experiences of dignity construction are organized into three distinct social arenas—individual, relational, and institutional. In reality, individuals’ daily experiences in the social world are likely to overlap between two or more of these arenas; however, I present the three arenas in this paper as distinct, analytical constructs, where individuals’ daily experiences are situated within a particular arena based on the conceptualizations provided by participants themselves. To better guide an understanding of this conceptual framework, I provide the following model (*Figure 1*).

Figure 1. Analytical Conceptual Framework: *Socio-Structural Aspects Mediating Daily Experiences in Social Arenas*



In this framework, experiences in each of the three arenas are facilitated by one or both of the key aspects of structural inequality, class division and constraints to opportunities. I find that daily experiences in the relational arena are primarily mediated by issues related to class division. Daily experiences in the individual arena are primarily mediated by issues related to structural constraints. A convergence of these two structural aspects mediate daily experiences in the institutional arena.

While individuals rarely acknowledge structural inequality explicitly, all participants discreetly acknowledge that a social hierarchy of food security exists, and offer a general recognition or assertion of their position within that hierarchy. The two key structural forces maintained by this hierarchy, class division and constraints to opportunities, underlie beliefs, judgments, understandings, and actions that impact individuals' sense of dignity through daily experiences in each of the three social arenas. In this chapter, I present an analysis of two key aspects of structural inequality—class division and constraints to opportunities—as perceived by individual participants, and address the question—How does structural inequality in the food system influence the social construction of human dignity?

CLASS DIVISION IN THE SOCIAL HIERARCHY

Class division within the social hierarchy of food security takes two forms—the division of classes into different social strata, which perpetuates myths and misperceptions about food insecurity; and the physical or geographic division of classes, which stigmatizes the spaces inhabited by under-resourced individuals and creates a sense of belonging within classes and a rejection or disregard of “the Other.” As noted by

Bedore (2014) and Caruso (2014), class division into differing social strata perpetuates a prominent social narrative that often blames the victim, frames issues related to food security as individual rather than structural, and propagates the idea that the personal choices and actions of the food insecure are the sole contributing force to their position in the social hierarchy. Discussing what he believes to be the underlying cause of food insecurity, a former government official and prominent civic leader illustrates this idea:

To me, in all shape or forms, it rolls back to economic possibilities and economic conditions. I'm not talking macro-economics on this, I'm talking about that individual person and the decisions that they need to be making. Food scarcity, and decision making very much go hand-in-hand...I don't want to sound elitist or superior as I say this, but there's a way to teach a different type of thought process to try and break that immediate gratification of what it appears from the outside to be the must-have thing, and roll it back to necessities for when you need necessities.

Related to the propensity to blame individuals rather than structural inequality for food insecurity, there exists a commonly held perception that individuals who are food insecure need to be “educated” or “enlightened” as a means of elevating them to attain a higher position in the social hierarchy. One way of legitimating this notion is through the implementation of social programs. A local government official touts the benefits of one such program that has been implemented in Oklahoma:

[It] is a program that's designed to teach someone who's living in poverty how to take care of themselves, and its basic stuff. The basic stuff is how to budget, how to interview, how to talk to people, how to best use whatever skills that they possess; in some cases, better grammar, better English, better spelling, those kinds of things. And, it's a leader-driven, self-help thing where the participants actually do things to try to improve their lot in life and help them be able to take care of themselves.

The practices of social programs will be discussed more in-depth in the following chapter as an aspect of the institutional arena that impacts individuals' sense of dignity. Yet, it is presented here to illustrate Farmer's (2004) argument that systems of structural violence serve to set certain classes of individuals apart from the lesser-valued status of “the Other.” For individuals who are not subjugated by systems of structural violence, the

victim-blaming narrative serves as a preservation tactic for their own individual sense of dignity. In this way, individuals who enjoy access to basic needs are able to assert a higher standing in the social structure, maintaining a certain level of honor and dignity as a result. Placing blame on an individual for their circumstances allows one the ability to take sole credit for their own achievements, rather than being forced to acknowledge the structurally mediated opportunities from which they have benefitted.

Understanding the victim-blaming aspect of structural violence is crucial to understanding dignity construction through individuals' every day experiences with food. Structural inequality acts to preserve a sense of dignity and self-worth for food secure individuals, while simultaneously degrading under-resourced individuals by blaming them for their own misfortune and inability to access appropriate amounts of nutritionally adequate food and other basic needs. A long-time community volunteer and member of the Operations Team of the FRC describes this tendency:

People from the outside would say, 'Well I've thought of volunteering at [the food pantry], but when I see them pull up and stand outside waiting for the doors to open and they're smoking cigarettes, I think that \$60 a carton, that could go toward food.' ...But, that's not a reason to say, 'I'm not going to serve these people because I don't agree with the way they spend their money.' ...You tell yourself stories so that you don't see what you don't want to see. And, I think maybe the people who would say, 'Well I can't volunteer there because I can't justify all of the luxuries those people buy when their children are starving,' I think that's just another story people tell themselves so they can sleep at night.

She explains that many people project (mis)perceptions of food insecurity onto situations, oftentimes, in ways that do not reflect the reality of situation, such as arguing that food insecure individuals take part in frivolous spending on "luxury items." Rather, many individuals who are food insecure buy items, like cigarettes, as a way to combat hunger and the stress of being severely under-resourced. Misperceptions, such as these, occur as a result of the drastically different social conditions and social norms that are divided along lines of class within the social hierarchy of food security. While those in higher

positions of the hierarchy deem cigarettes a privilege, those who are hungry find them to be a necessity, a means of saving money by suppressing hunger and skipping meals. A delineation between socially acceptable lifestyles or behaviors, determined by the elevation of one class' norms above another's, exacerbates the overall antipathy for "the Other," and promotes a general disregard, disdain, and distrust of the poor and under-resourced that permeates the social structure.

One woman, a prominent organizer in the community and leader in the emerging FRC, notes that the organization faced some struggles in galvanizing community support during the development phase due to community-wide feelings of distrust. When asked if she was referring to a "distrust of the system," she responded, "Not the system, but of the persons using the system." This perception was echoed in all thirty-eight research interviews, as participants who occupy a range of positions in the social hierarchy overwhelmingly noted a socially pervasive idea that under-resourced individuals are "taking advantage of resources" or "gaming the system." A long-time manager of food pantries and other food assistance programs, one man states:

There's myths out there about food banking. There's myths out there about people who go to food banks. I like to try and break those myths as much as I can. For example, people, you know, 'Everyone takes advantage of food stamps.' Or, you know, 'A lot of people on food stamps just waste their money.' In reality, when you look at the statistics, it's a very, very, very low percentage of people that actually take advantage or misuse it. Most people in the gap don't qualify, or don't qualify for enough

As noted by Farmer (2004), the pervasiveness of class-based (mis)perceptions and ideas at the structural level of society underlies the absence of a large-scale resolution to adequately address food insecurity and other issues related to structural violence. Perhaps the most critical aspect of social (mis)perceptions, is understanding how this ideology of individual blame perpetuated by class division acts as a veil, shielding society from the

ability to recognize the structural forces that maintain a social hierarchy of food security and act as barriers to accessing food for many. A thirty-six-year-old woman explains how her experiences of food insecurity are facilitated by structural forces outside of her control:

[Relying on food pantries] kind of makes you feel like less of a person, like you can't take care of yourself. But, sometimes that's not the case. I had a really good job, and I was there for almost three years, and she just sold her practice, and I'm looking for a job. It's not that I can't take care of myself. It's that I hit a hard spot, I lost my job, and that's not anticipated. So, you know, I'm relying on these things not because I don't want to take care of myself, or not because I can't. It's just, I'm unemployed. So, I think that sometimes the world looks down on you if you go to the food banks, or you're on benefits. But, I don't really know how I would be eating this past couple of months if I didn't have it...I mean, food is like the basic necessity. And, I just sometimes feel like people think that you're, you know, lower class or whatever if you go to food banks, or get SNAP benefits.

Reiterating the idea that one's position in the social hierarchy shapes their perceptions of the causes of food insecurity, she explains how her altered life circumstances shifted her to a lower position in the social hierarchy, and how her perceptions of food insecurity changed as a result:

I don't think [a lot of people] believe that people that have jobs go to food banks. But, they do. And, just because you work a full-time job at minimum wage, you're still in poverty. You're still on that line of not making enough. So, it's not just people that, you know, live off the government, or are looking for a handout and don't want to take care of themselves. A lot of people go because they can't make ends meet with what they make. There's a lot of people that work full-time and still can't make ends meet. You know, I didn't really know about it, either, until I started going. You know, I kind of had that mind-frame, too, of well, you know, they could be working. But, they are! They are working! Most of them are working, or trying to work. We have an abundance of food in this country, and people go hungry. I just don't think people realize that even working full-time you can still struggle and not have enough to buy food. I don't think a lot of people realize that people just go hungry in this country, still.

It is important to note that individuals cannot be blamed for holding (mis)perceptions related to food insecurity, any more than individuals can be blamed for the position they occupy in the social hierarchy. Because social myths, (mis)perceptions, and related ideals, such as the victim-blaming narrative that surrounds discussions of food insecurity, deeply permeate the structure of society, any individual belonging to the social order is likely to adhere to existing perceptions. Although ideologies are exerted at

the structural level, meaning no class of individuals is immune from wielding structural violence, the effects of structural violence are stratified in that it works to promote the dignity of those who hold higher positions in the social hierarchy and violate the dignity of those holding lower positions. As a result, (mis)perceptions and judgments generated by the social division of classes materialize during social encounters between individuals, and emerge in the context of food access in ways that can either promote or violate an individuals' sense of dignity. I will further explore the above dynamics in the following analysis chapter, where I discuss individuals' daily experiences in the relational arena.

Class division not only separates individuals into different social strata; but also, separates individuals into different physical geographies and social spaces. Physical separation of individuals based on their positions within the social hierarchy of food security is illustrated by the geographical design of the community, which designates certain neighborhoods or "sides of town" as best suited for certain classes of individuals. Similar to Jacobson et al's (2009) finding that under-resourced individuals in Toronto perceive themselves to be restricted by certain stigmatized geographies in the city, individuals in this study recognize the socio-spatial stigmatization of areas within the community. A member of the FRC's Operations Team explains how stigmatized areas of town serve to further separate individuals who are food secure from those who are not:

If it doesn't touch you, it's one of those things where you're not aware, you ignore, or whatever. You know, it may be just that stigma of, well, that end of town we just don't go there; that's where the lower-income live, and we just kind of turn our back on it and we're not aware of what their problems are.

The stigmatization of spaces and geographic locales is socially mandated by forces of structural inequality in that there is a propensity for individuals to inhabit only the spaces that are inhabited by similar classes of individuals. Individuals look for, and

recognize, certain status symbols, as previously defined by Goffman (1951), to determine who “belongs” or who is “welcome” in certain areas of town. A young mother of four, who struggles on a daily basis to access enough food for her family, discussed feeling as though her social status as a member of the community who is “hungry” and “poor” limited the places in town where she felt like she belonged:

I see a lot of money in this town, just you see it, you know, by the houses, the cars. You definitely see lower class, middle class, upper. You see that. You know who is who, and you know where they belong. So, to me, I think the people who don’t have a problem to pay their bills and buy their food, they have no idea what it’s like to be in some of these, like, my position. They have no idea what that’s like. They don’t have to. Why should they? They have what they need, you know.

Individuals rarely discuss the physical sequestration of social classes as a deliberately designed aspect of the social structure. Instead, it is taken for granted as a natural aspect of society, as if it just simply occurs that way. A retired man who struggles with food insecurity and lives in an area deemed as the “bad part” of town notes, “People are just group-ish in the way that they live”.

Yet, individuals who are subjugated in the social hierarchy are more likely to recognize this division as a deliberate means of maintaining or preserving a sense of dignity among those occupying higher ranks of the social hierarchy, arguing that to recognize this division as a structural issue rather than individual one makes people generally “uncomfortable.” This finding reinforces Farmer’s (2004) notion that a recognition of structural violence provokes a general “discomfort” in a society that is “geared to pinning praise or blame on individual actors” (307). To acknowledge the physical separation of classes as a deliberate force of structural inequality requires one to recognize the privileged status attached to their own inhabited spaces and the structural inequality that underlies that privilege. While discussing her initial reluctance to begin

volunteering at food banks and other places that existed within stigmatized spaces of the community, a middle-class woman in the community notes,

I was afraid that my middle-class persona, when I walked up to that door, through that crowd of people who had been waiting in the heat, some of them for hours, you know, how could I face them? How could I look in their eyes? And it goes back again to it's easier not to see it than it is to deal with the feelings that it generates in me.

Although few were as explicit in discussing their avoidance of stigmatized spaces in the community, every participant who occupies higher ranks of the social hierarchy of food security acknowledged that there were areas in town where they “just didn’t go.” One member of the Operations Team for the FRC explains a general attitude among community members as, “I live over here, so my back is to that area. So, do we have a problem in [our town]? No, we don’t have a problem [Laughter].” As a result of the deliberate division in the community, individuals who are not subjugated by structural violence are likely to avoid a recognition or awareness of the structurally mediated depth of needs that are faced by those who are forced to inhabit stigmatized spaces.

Geographic division of community members contributes to the social construction of dignity because it promotes a sense of “belonging” within classes, while ascribing a status of “the Other” to individuals in other classes. As noted by Hodgkiss’ (2013) review of Weber and Simmel’s theories, dignity “can come to be negatively regarded when other-directed social honorific attributions take place” (430). This leads to a general sense of disregard for the poor, and a sense of invisibility among people suffering the effects of food insecurity. Many individuals noted that even though the county in which they live has one of the highest rates of food insecurity and poverty in the state, the material conditions of these issues are a “well-kept secret,” or are “hidden very well in our society.” A long-time volunteer in the community stated:

Before I worked at [a community food pantry], I would have been hard-pressed to find poor people in [this town]. I didn't see them. They were invisible. And, after I worked at [the food pantry] for a few months, I was seeing the people I was serving all over the place... My eyes were just opened. I was seeing people that I didn't see before because I—I don't know why. I didn't expect to see them. I didn't know what it looked like.

Yet, for many who experience food insecurity and are confined to stigmatized spaces, there's a general feeling that others who hold higher positions in the social hierarchy are unaware of these issues, not through a naturalized process of class division in the community, but out of a deliberate avoidance. "They just don't *want* to see what's really going on," argues a retired veteran who discussed experiences of going days at a time without food, and has faced bouts of homelessness throughout his life. He continues:

I think [the community, as a whole] is totally unaware of what's going on. Like, the homeless people, they're not really people, they're kind of invisible, basically... [People] are happy with their own lives, and they sort of keep going. And, some of them may notice it, but they don't really—they look, but they don't see; let me put it that way. Because, there's a difference between looking and seeing.

Feeling invisible, ignored, and disregarded are sentiments that were echoed in every encounter I had with community members who struggle daily with experiences of food insecurity. A forty-eight-year-old woman raising two grandchildren and struggling to provide them with basic necessities, expresses a deep frustration regarding what people pay attention to in the community:

I think they don't see the need because they don't want to see the need. [This town] is a perfect little town; those problems really aren't here [Whispers sarcastically] ...I don't think it's hidden. I simply think people don't want to see it, you know. They see the homeless person with the sign that's probably going to go buy beer with it instead of food [Says sarcastically and rolls her eyes]. And, they think that's what we are. So, if they only see three or four of those around town, every couple of months, where's the problem? There's not a problem [to them].

Similarly, a young father to four children, who has been unemployed since he was laid off from his job in the oil field after the industry took an economic downturn, argues most people are more concerned with their own daily lives, and the spaces they inhabit as a result, than to notice anything happening outside of those spaces:

It's one of those things where [the need for food] is looked over because it's kind of one of those things brushed under the rug. You know what I mean? There's so many people around that are doing good, that they don't notice the ones that aren't, or the ones that are struggling, honestly. I mean, to put it point blank. I mean, they don't [see it]. There's a lot of people that are just—they live their lives. It's point A, point B, home; and anything in between there, it's just a blur to them.

Both in terms of social strata and physical geographies, class division perpetuates victim-blaming assumptions and myths about food insecurity, stereotypes and stigmatizes under-resourced individuals, and creates a sense of belonging within groups and a rejection of “the Other.” In this way, class division in the social hierarchy of food security determines how individuals from different social classes interact and treat one another in social encounters. These encounters will be discussed more in-depth in the following chapter as we explore individuals' daily experiences in the relational arena that influence a sense of dignity. The socially pervasive ideals and misperceptions about food insecurity that are propagated by class division also materialize as organizational practices and policies, which will be discussed in the following section related to individuals' daily experiences in the institutional arena.

CONSTRAINTS TO OPPORTUNITIES IN THE SOCIAL HIERARCHY

The second aspect of structural inequality considered in this analysis is the inequitable division of life opportunities that constrain individuals' life choices and experiences in certain ways. At a basic level, forces of structural inequality determine who in society has access to what kind of resources, and organizes social groups along those lines of division. For individuals who are subjugated within this structure, their circumstances and life choices are often constrained in ways that restrict their agency and autonomy. Everyday opportunities are limited in scope, forcing them to make decisions between a small range of undesirable options.

The most recognized constraint enacted by structural inequality is the lack of available financial resources, which was mentioned by every participant in this study as a significant barrier to accessing food. For some, financial strain came from not being able to obtain jobs with high enough wages to support themselves and their families. One mother of four explains how forces of structural inequality, such as low wages, act as a barrier for her family to be able to access enough food using any other means than relying on social assistance:

I've seen people go on rants, especially on like social media and things like that—about how people who are on government assistance, that we're all criminals, or that we're all—what's a good way to put it? Lazy, unproductive members of society; that we're just leaching off the system, you know. My wife, she works twelve to sixteen hours a day, and yet, we STILL need government assistance. I mean, we're a big family, how are we supposed to provide for everyone? And, like I said, personally I don't work. But, do you know how hard it is to get on disability? I can't stand on my leg for more than a couple hours at a time. Otherwise, it bruises completely around my leg. So, we're not lazy. We're not criminals. We're not bad people. People are just people, you know? It's amazing how back in the 1950's, 1960's, one parent could work and provide for their family a nice house, plenty of food. Like, what's changed? How is it that now, you have to have [assistance] just to make it, just to have enough, you know? And still, we're paying out of pocket like two hundred dollars a month in cash, just for food.

For others, high costs associated with other basic needs, such as healthcare, housing, and transportation, posed severe obstacles to being able to procure adequate amounts of food.

A thirty-six-year-old mother to two expressed a deep frustration with the state of the healthcare system, and the ways that the current structure of that system has shifted their family's circumstance from a place of security, both financially and in terms of food, to a state of absolute insecurity. Although she has a college education, she is no longer able to work due to a chronic illness, and the associated medical bills are so high that the income from her husband's job can no longer cover their family's basic needs. She explains:

Once all the bills come out, that leaves you with not enough to support [your family]. So, now I am forced to go to food banks...and, it's not enough. I haven't eaten in two days. My kids have eaten. We make sure that our kids eat. But, my husband and I have not. And, it is what it is. I mean, we have found ourselves so many times selling things—I mean, just to buy a loaf of bread, just to buy some peanut butter. It's terrible. And, being on disability, this town does not—I cannot find a job that can cater to my needs. It's usually full-time jobs. I can't work full-time. I'm limited with what I can do, lift, sitting, what have you. So, there's just not—it's very hard. [Very

emotional, crying.] So, that's where we're at. Even currently, right now, that's where we're at. It feels great to pay all the bills. But then, there's nothing, you know... And, I have a five-year-old, who is growing, and needs these things, and fruits and vegetables, and I can't provide that for her. So, that's that.

As is the case with many individuals in similar circumstances, the stress of not being able to make ends meet is compounded by the confinement of making difficult, life-altering, decisions on a daily basis, many of which are out of her control. She explains:

My husband needs to be on blood pressure medicine, but guess what, we can't afford it. So, I pray every day that I don't lose him in his sleep, or something like that, because all of my medications outweigh—you make the hard choices. [Very emotional, crying.] It's a hard choice. Do we go for our health, or do we feed our kids? Do we pay our rent, or do we let the electric go off? ALL of that! All of that is all—that's life. And, I don't think there's enough people who truly know—truly, truly—we've got all these commercials to help all these countries, and I feel for them, my heart, I understand. But, we've got SO many people here that you—we need to fix—we need to figure out how to make that better. Because, the choices are hard; and the choices, when you have kids, are very, very difficult.

These “difficult decisions” and “really tough choices,” are a reoccurring theme in every interview with under-resourced individuals. For many, the constraints placed on their lives by structural inequality mean they are forced to decide between which basic human need can be met, and which can be done without. A thirty-four-year-old mother to four explains the restraints placed on her family's budget, describing how that constrains her ability to meet all of their basic needs:

I'm just not getting enough hours at work. Well, if I don't get enough hours at work, I can't pay my bills. If I can't pay my bills, I can't pay my rent, put gas in my car, do the laundry, then I'm sure not going to have enough money for food. And, it's one of those—look for other job? I've tried to find a different job, a part-time job, and it's just not feasible right now.

Exacerbating the effects of structurally mediated financial constraints, this mother also explains how her position in the social hierarchy places social constraints on her life on a daily basis. Recently, she received a call at work from her son's school, asking her to pick him up because he was very ill. She argues that for many holding higher positions in the social hierarchy, this circumstance would be considered inconvenient, at worst. Yet, due to the nature of her employment, and inflexibility of work hours, she had to make the

grueling decision between leaving her job to pick up her son and putting her employment status at risk, or staying at work to maintain employment and leaving her son uncared for. In consideration of the latter option, she asserts that herself, and others holding similar positions in the social hierarchy, live in a heightened state of fear that DHS or other authorities will claim she is unfit to care for her children. She notes:

And then, I'm in something else that I don't need to have on top of me, you know, and it's just, each day is a different battle, different struggles. Each day, you don't know what the next day is going to bring. You don't know if you're going to have food to eat the next day, or if you're going to have enough money in your check to have a house to live in, or gas in your car to make sure you get to work. Each day is a different struggle. I just take them as they come at me. Most people are like, 'Well, I don't know how you handle all this.' What choice do I have? I mean, honestly! ...Yeah, I complain a lot, especially when I get home I complain a lot. [Very emotional, crying.] But, at the end of the day, it's like, I did the best I could with what I had. So, it's life. I can't do anything about it. I can't change it. Well, I guess I could if I really wanted to. I mean, but, in order to change life, I'd have to find a better job, and that obviously is not happening right now. You know, I would love to go back to school, but I have four kids. I can't afford to go back to school.

Similar circumstances were described by many of the participants in this study, where structural inequality cultivates a social environment where the poor and under-resourced are not only financially constrained by their position in the social hierarchy, but are also socially constrained. Often, these two types of constraints work together, in tandem, to force individuals who are subjugated within the social hierarchy to make choices, on a daily basis, that render equally damaging outcomes.

For some, structural constraints mean they are forced to make difficult decisions between going hungry or accessing food for themselves and their families in socially unacceptable ways, which often incorporate some type of illicit behavior. Due to the rigid, bureaucratic nature of food assistance, both in community agencies and government programs, some individuals assert the need to break agency rules or alter documents and forms in order to access food. Arguably, this behavior might contribute to the pervasive social narratives that under-resourced individuals are “taking advantage,”

or “gaming the system.” However, individuals who are accustomed to this conduct, maintain that the practices are not malicious in intent. Rather, illicit behavior, or noncompliance, is viewed as an unfortunate necessity in response to a system of rules and regulations that do not adequately address or reflect the structurally mediated depth of their needs. One mother to two describes how individuals perceive this quandary:

I’ve never done it, I know people who do—I think people get pushed to the fact that they have to lie just to get help. And, I feel like the people who are lying to get the help, you know, if they truly deserve it—and then if they get caught, then it’s all these fines and jail. Well, what are you supposed to do? I mean, you’re doing what you have to do to survive. You’re doing what you have to do!

Disenfranchisement and loss of a sense of dignity caused by the rigid rules and bureaucratic structures complicit in food assistance agencies and programs will be further discussed in the following chapter regarding daily experiences in the institutional arena.

Participants also discuss feeling compelled to participate in criminal behaviors as a means of acquiring food for themselves and their families. Such was the case with one mother, who was forced to break the law after she had exhausted all other means of procuring food for her children:

I will steal whatever I have to, to get my kids what they need, food to eat...I got caught one time stealing in the store, trying to buy food. It was great [Sarcastic]. It sucked! I went to jail. Kids had to come down to the jail and bail me out. [Very emotional, crying.] But, it’s one of those, you don’t have money to buy food, you’re hungry. I’m not going to let my kids starve to death, you know. So, if I have to go steal food, I’ll steal food. And, I’ll do it again. I’ll take that risk of getting caught. But, that’s the risk I’m going to take, you know. And, any parent that I know would do the same thing. Well, if it really came down to it. It sucks. It happened. I’m not proud of it.

Several other participants alluded to taking part in criminal behaviors at one time or another as a means of feeding their families. Though few others were as explicit in naming their crimes, several mention things like “doing stuff on the streets I’m not proud of” or “stuff I hope my kids never find out about,” in order to feed their families. A young father, who made reference to criminal activity as a means of earning money to

feed his children, noted, “I don’t like to do it, but my kids got to eat, you know. It sucks.” Although individuals were apt to phrase all of these instances of illicit behavior as “having to make a difficult decision,” each individual insisted they did not have an actual choice in the matter. When it came down to either committing a crime or forcing their children to go days without food, they felt they only had one real option—crime. When discussing these experiences, individuals often became very emotional, showing signs of deep frustration and anger with “the system,” as well as feelings of shame and disenfranchisement due to structural constraints. Through heavy tears, one mother describes the dilemma faced by severely under-resourced individuals:

The people who get caught stealing food, they’re doing that for a reason! [Very emotional, crying.] They’re not doing that because they want to go to jail! They’re doing that for a reason! And, people need to look at why. They’re stealing food for their families. It’s not because they want to break the law! It’s because they need to feed their family. [Bangs hand on the table.] It’s just horrible. It’s a horrible feeling! It’s a horrible situation! It’s horrible! You feel like a failure. You just never intended to do this...and it’s exhausting! It is. It throws your mental health in the, you know—so then you start fighting depression, and then you start fighting all kinds of—I mean, it’s a domino effect all the way around. It’s a domino effect all the way around. [Crying]

The strict constraint of individuals’ opportunities to access food in socially acceptable ways only further subjugates them in the social hierarchy of food security. A young father of four, who was careful not to reveal any details regarding his criminal behavior other than, “I had to do things I’m not very proud of to feed my family,” expressed his deep frustrations with not being able to find work as a result:

I wasn’t able to get 40 hours in two weeks. I mean, at a lot of these fast food places, they don’t give you stuff like that. You know what I mean? And, I have nine felonies. Nobody really wants to hire me [Laughter.] Yeah, I mean, it’s hard, it really is. People don’t understand. When you have felonies, they look at [your application], and they’re like, ‘Ehhhh, I really don’t want that.’ You know? And, I mean, it’s really not fair because I’ve dealt with it since 2006. It’s just one of those things where people basically judge you off a piece of paper, and it’s like, that’s not even really me no more! It hasn’t been me in ten years! You know? I haven’t gotten in trouble for a reason, you know? But, yeah, that paper follows you around.

Following Marx's argument that capitalist social relations deny individuals a certain autonomy (Peffer 1990), the constraint of individuals' ability to act with any real sense of agency in these situations has a tremendous impact on their sense of dignity on a daily basis. Experiences with agency and dignity will be discussed more in-depth in the following chapter as we explore the individual arena of dignity construction.

The analysis presented in this chapter regarding class division and constraints to opportunities provides a foundational understanding of the structural dynamics of dignity construction through individuals' daily experiences with food access and foodways. Class division, as a key aspect of structural inequality, perpetuates beliefs, judgments, understandings, and actions that impute both successes and failures to individuals rather than acknowledging the systemic exertion of structural violence that underlies individuals' opportunities to either achieve success or find failure. Misperceptions permeate every level of the social strata and become engrained in the fabric of society. Thus, the overall structure of society is marked by the inclination to confer praise or blame on individual actors. Furthermore, structural inequality confines individuals' to a particular position in the social hierarchy; and as such, acts as a key determinant and constraint to individuals' opportunities. Therefore, individuals' daily experiences with food, and the human dignity that is constructed within these experiences, are largely mediated by class division and structural constraints in the social hierarchy of food security. In the following chapter, I discuss individuals' daily experiences determined by the social hierarchy of food security to consider dignity construction in individual, relational and institutional arenas, as well as the ways in which individuals' perceive their sense of dignity to be impacted through these experiences.

CHAPTER VI

THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF DIGNITY IN THE RELATIONAL, INDIVIDUAL, AND INSTITUTIONAL ARENAS

In this chapter I address the social arenas where individuals perceive daily, lived experiences to impact their sense of dignity either positively or negatively. Due to the complex and interconnected nature of all aspects of social life, human dignity, understood as a universal property or social condition, is fluid and exists concurrently within each social arena. However, when discussing lived experiences related to the cultivation or preservation of one's dignity, individuals perceive these events to occur in three particular social arenas—individual, relational, and institutional. I consider each of these social arenas as analytical constructs representing levels of the social world where individuals experience phenomena related to dignity construction and preservation. While there is overlap between experiences in each of the social arenas, for ease of analysis, experiences of dignity construction are presented based on the conceptualizations provided by the lived experiences of individuals.

DIGNITY CONSTRUCTION IN THE RELATIONAL ARENA

The relational arena envelops daily life experiences that are perceived by individuals to involve social encounters between themselves and other individuals. As mentioned in the former chapter, daily experiences in the relational arena impact individuals' sense of dignity due to both the social and geographic division of classes in the social hierarchy of food security. First, the perpetuation of social misperceptions and judgments regarding the food insecure emerge during social encounters, and are facilitated by a *social* division of classes. Second, social bonding and the sense of “belonging” that occurs within classes are facilitated by the *geographic* division of classes in the social hierarchy. Regarding food practices and processes, individuals' daily experiences in the relational arena with *food access* have the strongest influence on the social construction of dignity. These experiences are characterized by the social encounters between individuals and others during food procurement processes.

In this context, it is critical to understand the difference between social encounters characterized as “treatment” and those characterized as “interactions.” Regardless of their position in the social hierarchy of food security, all participants find it difficult, or impossible, to think of ways they are “treated” in grocery stores that elevates their sense of dignity. When asked how they are “treated” in these spaces, participants either confusedly say “fine” or “okay, I guess,” or they begin discussing encounters that degrade their sense of dignity. Conversely, when asked about “interactions” they have in grocery stores, participants are much more likely to recount experiences that elevate their sense of dignity. This is an important distinction, as “treatment” infers there is both a subject and object, making it an asymmetrical social encounter; whereas, the term “interaction” suggests a more symmetrical social encounter. This finding reaffirms

Jacobson's (2009) assertion that the level of symmetry in any relationship between social actors is directly related to the cultivation of individuals' sense of dignity.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, structural inequality in the social hierarchy of food security is maintained by class division, through both social and geographic means. The division of classes underlies this distinction between "treatment" and "interaction" in the social construction of dignity. Individuals contend their sense of dignity is enhanced in *interactions* with other individuals who have similar life circumstances and who share a general sense of understanding; whereas, individuals' sense of dignity is degraded when they are set apart from the group as "the Other" by being *treated* as such during social encounters. In this section, I first present individuals' daily experiences with food access that enhance a sense of dignity; then, I present individuals' daily experiences with food access that degrade a sense dignity.

Positive Impacts to Dignity through Daily Experiences with Food Access

Participants perceive their sense of dignity to be promoted or enhanced in the relational arena through interactions with others who hold similar positions to themselves in the social hierarchy of food security. Daily experiences with social interactions occur during processes of food procurement, and promote social bonding or a sense of "belonging." While few participants explicitly express a sense of dignity cultivation through social encounters, instances of dignity enhancement or preservation are evident in the ways that individuals recount experiences with either an overly positive manner or by expressing gratification for connecting or bonding with other individuals during such processes.

When asked about experiences and interactions at the places they go to get food, the majority of participants describe the food sites as the primary grounds of the relational arena. In these spaces, individuals report having a variety of social interactions that promote one's sense of dignity, ranging from simple recipe exchanges to developing friendships and relationships that continue even outside of the spaces. For some, deciding where to access food is based, at least in part, on the type of interactions they expect to happen. A sixty-seven-year-old retiree discussed how he takes this into consideration when he chooses which local grocery store he will visit. He mentions the local IGA was his favorite grocery store; and when asked why, he responded:

It's just the atmosphere. The people were quite friendly, and the lady at the checkout always checked your eggs to see if there were any cracked eggs in there. And the owner was right there and he would push out the cart if you needed. If that was what needed to be done, he would push out the cart and take the groceries to your car, and I liked that.

Rather than focusing on the product, or accessibility of the location, what makes this his preferred grocery store is the interactions he has with the owner and employees. A sixty-six-year-old woman echoes this sentiment:

I like when I go into my grocery store that, they might not know my name, but I'm familiar to them, there's a sense of recognition, helpfulness. If I go to—I don't mind standing in a long line if someone's reasonably polite—not just polite, but pleasant; and at least, you know, just *with* you in the process, in the whole ordeal...I go to the Farmer's Market. That's really where I do most of my shopping, and probably as much as anything because it's familiar to me. At the market, there are vendors that we have gotten to know, and it makes a difference to us! I recently visited with the owners and operators of Green Acres, and it is a very nice shop as well, and they have—there are things there that you can't get any place else.

Basing the decision of where to access food on the probability of experiencing positive social interactions is almost exclusively practiced by individuals who hold higher positions in the social hierarchy of food security. For those who are food insecure, many argue that they are not obliged to this privilege. Nevertheless, individuals who struggle with food insecurity report an elevated sense of dignity through positive social

interactions during processes of food procurement; the main difference being that food insecure individuals have fewer choices of where they can shop for food, and less control over the interactions they will experience when there.

For individuals across all ranks of the food security spectrum, there is a sense that the places you go to get food are the center, or “the heart” of the community, and individuals often cite interacting with friends, neighbors, and colleagues in these spaces. One woman, who maintains a regular Saturday grocery shopping schedule, discusses how going to the grocery store often turns into a social event. She notes:

It’s funny, because we go almost every Saturday morning we see the same people, we see couples from our Sunday school class...so, that kind of becomes a little bit of a social time as well. [Laughter.] ... We’ll look at each other’s basket and go, “Ooh, that looks good,” or, “Ooh, these are on sale,” or “Ah, they’re out of avocados again. Do they know its summer in Oklahoma?” you know, “We want some avocados, Wal-Mart!” So, yeah we will talk and compare and share recipes. “Is [your husband] making Gumbo? Ooh, when?” [Laughter.]

This idea of accessing food as a social event is, perhaps, best illustrated by individuals’ accounts of visiting the local farmer’s market. A thirty-nine-year-old mother to three maintains that her interactions at the farmer’s market are characterized by developing social connections with others who shop and sell goods there. “I love the fresh, clean air, and visiting with people who grew stuff! I have a garden in the backyard so I love to learn from them so I know. Like, ‘When do you cut your asparagus?’ because I just planted some, or ‘When should I plant that?’ and, I don’t know, I like the visiting aspect!” Another woman in the community discusses her interactions at the farmer’s market as a means of recognizing and maintaining a sense of community:

I do go to farmer’s market for the fun of it...I think it’s just a fun experience to shop out in the open and to see people that have grown a product and are—it’s a community feeling to me. The farmer’s market is more than food shopping. If I *need* something I’m probably just going to run into Food Pyramid and get it. But, if I have time for a food *experience*, and I’m thinking, ‘Oh, this would be really good to have, say, fresh banana bread for breakfast.’ or, whatever it is...Maybe, that again takes me back to my roots of appreciating what they put into it. You know, I’ve been there, done that. I don’t want to do that, but I appreciate what they’ve put into it, and respect it. So, that’s probably where the community piece comes into play. I enjoy the people that are there.

That's probably what draws me even more than the actual purchase of an item, just that environment, even if it's just a few booths, you know. I can relate to where they are.

While many participants describe these shopping experiences and social interactions as a means of feeling a sense of community or developing social connections, every interaction mentioned occurs between individuals in the same class of the social hierarchy of food security. When describing a place to access food as having “a community feel” or being “the heart” of the community, they are referring, specifically, to the “community” of individuals which they feel they belong to; rather than the larger community as a whole. While no individuals offer a blatant recognition of this class division in their social interactions during food procurement, all individuals note how these experiences elevate their sense of dignity through human connection and development of social bonds with others who have similar life experiences and circumstances.

Importantly, the sense of belonging that is developed through social interactions in food spaces is not uniquely experienced by those holding higher positions in the social hierarchy of food security. While individuals who are food secure are more likely to have experiences in spaces that participants tend to stigmatize as middle-class or white spaces, such as the farmer's market, individuals who are food insecure report feeling the same sense of social bonding and connection through interactions with other individuals in local food pantries and at community meals. A sixty-eight-year-old woman who has used food pantries off and on throughout her life mentioned that the pantry she visits has a “good community feel to it.” Noting, “You see people there that you know, and you can interact, you know, visit.” Likewise, an eighty-four-old-retiree explains that he and his father have attended the community-provided meals in the area for years, sometimes out

of need for food, and sometimes simply because they “enjoy the fellowship so much.” In fact, almost every participant who uses food assistance programs in the area claim they have built meaningful relationships with others who go to pantries and other community meal sites to access food:

I just meet [people] there. You know, it’s a very social group for the most part. We see each other every time we go! I mean, it’s a community. It’s a lot like the homeless community in a sense. And, there’s a community involved in people that use the food banks. Once you get over the shame of having to go to a food bank, and you know all those people are in the exact same situation, then you talk and find out, and you ask questions—Or, I do, I should say. I do. I mean, a lot of people are like me. And, you’ll see little groups swapping out in the parking lot. I mean, if you want to see something, wait about five minutes after it closes and go see the swap shop. [Laughter.]

In contrast to the experiences noted by food secure individuals, these relationships are not necessarily relationships of convenience, cultivated based solely on being in the same spaces at the same time. Instead, individuals discuss the development of these personal connections with others who experience similar life circumstances and understand what it’s like to struggle with food insecurity, as an emotional support and a social bond that not only elevates their sense of dignity, but also helps to alleviate some of the barriers they face to accessing food. A thirty-four-year-old woman explains how developing relationships with others at food banks alleviates some of the negative impacts to her sense of dignity that occur as a result of judgment from those holding higher positions in the social hierarchy with no experience with food insecurity:

You know, you’re in a little rich society group, and somebody goes, ‘Oh, food banks. Oh, well, that’s just for people who are on drugs and this, that, and the other.’ And, I’m like, no it’s not. You don’t know unless you’ve been there. And, I think a lot of people that go to these food banks, who get to talk—you get to talking to people, you find out what their circumstances are. You get close, because you’ve been there. You understand how it feels, and what’s going on. So, you know, people who don’t know, who don’t understand, who haven’t seen it first-hand, I don’t feel should be able to pass judgment on anybody.

For all individuals, regardless of their position in the social hierarchy, interactions with others in the spaces and places where they access food are likely to promote their sense of

dignity if these interactions are characterized by a symmetrical social encounter. In these experiences, individuals are able to develop social connections and a sense of belonging, which influences the social construction of dignity as a result.

Negative Impacts to Dignity through Daily Experiences with Food Access

Whereas dignity promotion through social encounters during processes of food procurement is experienced by individuals from all levels of the social hierarchy, dignity violation through social encounters are exclusively experienced by individuals who are subjugated in the social hierarchy, due to the asymmetrical nature of encounters. For those who are food insecure, the social encounters that demean or violate their sense of dignity during experiences with food access are characterized by the misperceptions and judgments curated by structural inequality and the division of classes into differing social strata and stigmatized geographic spaces. When discussing social encounters in the relational arena that diminish individuals' sense of dignity, three main experiences are referenced; 1) receiving judgment from others when using the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), also referred to as food stamps, at grocery stores, 2) being treated poorly at community food pantries, and 3) social encounters with others in the community where they feel stigmatized, shamed, and policed as a result of their subjugated position in the social hierarchy.

Daily experiences in the relational arena negatively impact individuals' sense of dignity through social encounters where others are overtly rude or condescending, as well as social encounters that are simply marked by an overall sense of judgment. A thirty-

three-year-old mother to four described how she and her family are often distinguished as “the Other” during social encounters when she uses her SNAP benefits:

If you go and try to buy something from a gas station [with food stamps], the process is long because they have to go and run it through their machine, and you stand there feeling ridiculous ... You have people waiting in line behind you, getting aggravated, because they know that if somebody in front of them is paying for something with food stamps, it takes like two, three times as long to purchase their stuff. So, then I’ve got people that have never met me before getting aggravated with me because I needed to pick up a loaf of bread—overpriced bread, but still, you know. It’s ridiculous. So, [I feel] like I’m a burden, you know, to the average every day going citizen... They don’t speak to you directly. A lot of people are passive aggressive when it comes to—Indirectly, you know. They’ll be like, ‘Oh, great, it’s another one,’ you know, ‘Like I didn’t have to wait long enough,’ or something like that. They don’t speak to me directly, but they make comments under their breath or to another person about you.

When asked how experiences like this impact her, she elaborated:

Well, being a lesbian, I already kind of feel like a social outcast, so to speak. You know, especially, being a lesbian with mixed kids, that makes us even more of a minority. You know, so, we get a lot of sideways looks just being out in public with our three brown kids and one white kid, and the fact that their moms are lesbians. They already look at us funny. But, it makes me feel like more of a social outcast that we also have people who are passive aggressive that are going to mumble comments under their breath about how we need to purchase our food through SNAP, you know? [Crying.]

Almost every participant who uses food stamps to purchase food shares similar experiences, where they are overtly chastised for the type of food they purchase with food stamps, the amount of time it takes for the payment to process, or simply just for using SNAP at all. These experiences reassert Rogers-Dillon’s (1995) finding that individuals experience a certain stigmatization through social interactions when they use forms of welfare assistance.

As discussed in the first chapter of analysis, experiences are directly related to the socially perpetuated ideology which blames individuals, rather than forces of structural inequality, for their place in the social hierarchy of food security. This ideology underlies the general antipathy for “the Other,” and is felt by individuals during these social encounters, regardless if others blatantly express this disdain or not. A fifty-three-year-old-woman who has struggled off and on with food insecurity and homelessness

throughout her life, explains how a general awareness that these judgments exist impacts her during daily experiences with using food stamps at local grocery stores:

Yeah, there's been sometimes I just have felt that people are like, 'Oh, she's pulling out [food stamps]!' [Laughter.] I mean, with my own conception, you know, 'they'll see it!' Because, I know different things people complain about, people taking [advantage], you know, helping people with food and they need to get out and work. And so, it seems like sometimes when I'm in front of somebody, it's like I can—I don't know, it's probably just me a lot of times, but I feel like they're, you know, 'There goes another food stamp person!' [Rolls eyes.] I feel like that sometimes! And then, one time I was in a line, I said, 'Well, you know, I've been looking for a job. You don't want to give me a job, so I guess you're going to have to pay for my food stamps!' [Laughter.] I was saying, not them per se. But, I'm just saying, you know, society's looking at me, and I'm not getting a job, so I guess you're going to just continue to pay for food stamps, you know. [Laughter.]

For individuals who require a specific kind of diet and rely on food stamps or other forms of food assistance, there is a sense that the general disdain or antipathy they receive from others is significantly higher than it is for individuals who use food stamps to get “poor people food,” which is a term commonly used to describe the stereotypical diet of under-resourced individuals. Due to the nature of the social hierarchy of food security, many holding lower positions in this hierarchy are made to feel as though they are not “worthy” of buying certain kinds of foods that are deemed appropriate only for individuals in higher classes. As a vegan, this thirty-six-year-old woman notes demeaning experiences with purchasing appropriate foods for her diet with food stamps:

I mean, sometimes I get embarrassed, like in the line at the store, because I'm buying vegan food and I'm buying all this stuff, and then I pull out my SNAP card. And, you know, it's just—it's kind of embarrassing sometimes for me. I'm like, 'Ehhhh,' [Indicating uncertainty/being uncomfortable]. But, it is what it is...I don't know. I think it's the whole, you know, cultural idea, where you—you're poor. You know, you're poor, you're living off the government, you know, people are paying for you to essentially eat by their taxes. And, it's—it's just—I don't know—it just makes me feel funny.

Others state they feel the need to disguise their food stamps in order to avoid judgment or poor treatment from individuals. This is especially true for those who are new to using food assistance programs. A thirty-six-year-old woman, forced to rely on food stamps in recent years, describes what the experience of using food stamps was like

when she first began using them. She explains, “So, when I would swipe my card, I would hold my hand over it. That way, it looked like a credit card. Because, you can tell, you know—yeah, you’re going to get looked at! “Gah, look at her. She’s got food stamps.” You know? That’s how it is!” In these instances, food stamps, or even the types of food people purchase with them, are recognized as ‘status symbols,’ which Goffman (1951) argues divides classes of individuals and maintains solidarity within categories and “hostility between different categories” (294). Individuals recognize these status symbols during processes of food procurement in the relational arena, and police others accordingly.

In discussions centered on food procurement processes, such as grocery shopping, and the social encounters individuals have with others during these processes, participants were more likely to explicitly mention negative encounters that serve to demean their sense of dignity, (if they had these encounters), than positive ones. As previously mentioned, social encounters in the context of food access that serve to degrade individuals’ sense of dignity are recognized as “treatment” rather than an “interaction.” When it comes to accessing food at food pantries, this is the term used most often by participants to describe their experiences. Discussing ways they are “treated” at food pantries that negatively impact their sense of dignity, accounts from participants range from discreet forms of judgment, to more explicit, overt degrading comments and actions. Though, all forms of treatment in these spaces are generally acknowledged as the result of class division, where socially perpetuated stereotypes and stigmas of the poor impact the social encounters that are experienced in the food pantries. One mother of four, who has to rely on food pantries because her full-time job as a fast-

food manager does not provide enough income to support her family, notes how these stereotypes arise in the ways she is treated in community food pantries:

I'm treated nicely, I mean, they're not rude or anything. But, they kind of look at you like you're poor, you know. Which, I am. I'm a poor person. But, it's like, they feel like—you get the look like, 'Are you here because you need food? Or, are you here because you sold all your food stamps to get crack cocaine, blah blah, whatever, and now you need food to eat?' It's kind of one of those stares...I'm here because I have to be, I don't want to be, trust me...And, it's sad that our society has kind of broke down into that, like, labelling people like that. But, I mean, we're human. It's kind of what we do.

Although some participants report being treated “fine” or even “well,” the majority of participants were quick to recount at least one overtly negative experience, if not many more, where they were treated “with utter disregard” as one participant put it, or as another stated, “treated like you’re a piece off the street.” One woman who has used food pantries off and on throughout older adulthood describes the social encounters she experiences at the food pantries:

They treat you like crap. They're very condescending here...I mean, it's not the process, it's the attitude of the people that are there. You know, yes, [they're] there to help. Yes, [they] have to follow [their] rules. And, yes, I'm taking charity. And, I understand I'm taking charity. But, that doesn't mean you have the right to be mean to me...I mean, you know, I'll take something and it's, [Whispers]: 'Are you even sure what that is?' 'Uh, yeah. I cook.' They want to be helpful, but they can be real jerks. I mean, they just really can. I mean, I don't think it's intentional that they mean to be. But, they just really are...it's just not a pleasant experience with that.

Many individuals report similar experiences at food pantries, where they feel demeaned or degraded by volunteers' assumptions that they are ignorant in regard to basic food processes and nutrition. Although some participants who are food insecure state they don't enjoy cooking, or wish they knew more about food, there is no real difference in the number of food secure individuals who report feeling the same. Yet, the stereotype that under-resourced individuals are less likely than others to have basic food knowledge persists. As previously mentioned in the first chapter, the propensity to blame individuals for their own circumstances with food insecurity underlies a general belief that these individuals are uneducated or unaware of how to provide for themselves. In this way,

socially perpetuated stereotypes regarding the poor and under-resourced materialize in social encounters in the relational arena, and set these individuals apart as “the Other.” The social myth that under-resourced individuals are uneducated about food will also be discussed in the final section of this chapter regarding daily experiences in the institutional arena, as these stereotypes underlie the practices and policies of community food assistance programs.

Individuals who use community food programs, such as food pantries and community meals, mention judgment or treatment from other community members that negatively impacts their sense of dignity. When asked how community members holding higher positions in the social hierarchy view food assistance programs in the area and the individuals using the programs, a sixty-one-year-old retired veteran explains:

You’re definitely [treated like] a second-class citizen! You’re one of those smelly masses over there, running around, trying to sponge off the system. ‘Get a job. Pay Taxes,’ and stuff... Yeah! [I’ve encountered that] several times. ‘You get a job.’ ‘You get an education.’ ‘Go work!’ Unfortunately, I have trouble sitting up for any length of time... There’s really nothing you can do, because no matter what you do they’ve already set their mind to what you are, and they’re not going to change it. You can’t change anybody’s perception of what’s going on. You know, I can’t make you think any different about how you think of me.

Degrading social encounters, such as the one described above, are perpetuated by class division in the community. While barely noticed by those who hold positions in higher classes, the deliberate class division that confers asymmetrical social encounters between members of different classes is quite evident to individuals subjugated in the social hierarchy. Social encounters are often characterized by (mis)perceptions of the lives of the food insecure that are perpetuated by this class divide. One woman in the community who struggles with being severely under-resourced, notes the ways that she is made aware of these judgments, as well as the ways that she manages her self-presentation in

public to maintain her sense of dignity in social encounters and to avoid the policing and poor treatment that she is likely to encounter otherwise:

I think [other people] think we don't need it. We're fat. We're overweight. You know, 'How can a person without money be overweight?' That's an issue. I think we are looked down upon. But, that's only the same people who would look down on using food stamps. You know, 'You're a leach on the system,' and blah, blah, blah...I mean, not at the food bank. You hear it out in public. And, a lot of people don't think I'm as poor as I am. I live in a two-bedroom house. It's a family home. I fix my nails. I do them myself. I get twelve dollar haircuts. I get my clothes from the thrift store, but I always try to look nice. And so, people associate poor with dirty, and poor with having NOTHING, and not being a smart shopper. So, I think that's the perception. That's my perception. The way I see people perceiving me.

Individuals who use food pantries are also extremely aware of the stigmatization of spaces that is perpetuated by the geographic division of classes in the community.

Related to Weber and Simmel's idea that dignity and honor are realized through interactive comparisons of difference between the self and others (Hodgkiss 2013), stigmatization is best illustrated by participants' comparative understanding of their experiences with food access. Many food insecure individuals discuss the differences between using "traditional" or "normal" resources for accessing food, such as going to a grocery store, versus using food assistance, such as food pantries or community meals. When asked how his experiences with using food pantries compares to experiences at grocery stores, one man laughs, indicating the extreme lack of similarity between the experiences, and remarks, "Totally different!" He continues:

The price is sort of right [at a food bank]. The financial price is okay. The emotional and social price you pay to get [food] is a lot more...you have to give a lot of pride up to go to a food bank. The stigma attached to going to a food bank is pretty great... You're sort of—'Oh, you're one of THEM, you should do what we say,' and you know, I'm not being sensitive. It's just one of those things. And, it's just not me that they do it to. A lot of people are talking about it.

The socio-spatial stigmatization of places to access food emerges during social encounters in the relational arena between individuals who are separated into different classes based on the spaces they inhabit. As this man observes, class separation sets himself, and those who access food in stigmatized spaces, apart as "the Other," or one of

“them.” Many other participants mention having similar experiences of stigmatization, and specifically note having to “give up their pride,” or “humble themselves” in order to inhabit stigmatized spaces. As one woman noted, “I mean, the shame and all that is a barrier [to using food pantries]. But, if you’re desperate you will do it. It just depends on how desperate you are.”

DIGNITY CONSTRUCTION IN THE INDIVIDUAL ARENA

The individual arena encapsulates daily life experiences that, while they occur in social settings or in the social world, are perceived by individuals to primarily involve themselves and their identity, or are experiences where they are the primary actor. As discussed in the former chapter regarding inequitable division of life opportunities and structural constraints, many of these daily experiences in the individual arena that cultivate individuals’ sense of dignity occur as a result of individuals being either confined or privileged to particular life chances or opportunities, which are determined by individuals’ position in the social hierarchy of food security.

Similar to findings by Alkon and Norgaard (2009) and Hauck-Lawson (1998), individuals in this study regard food as an implicit component of both their individual and cultural identity. As noted by Berger and Luckmann (1967), Gewirth (1992), and Nordenfelt (2004), dignity is inextricably attached to individuals’ sense of identity. In the individual arena, daily experiences with *foodways*, in particular, influence the social construction of dignity through developing or diminishing one’s sense of identity or self-concept. Experiences are characterized by individuals’ attachment to particular foodways and the personal meanings individuals ascribe to foods, and are illustrated by the ways

identity is recognized in food practices and cultural traditions. Constructing dignity in this context, individuals report an elevation of their sense of dignity when they are permitted to engage in foodways they deem important, and a degradation of their sense of dignity when they are restricted from participating in these foodways. The analysis that follows explores daily experiences of dignity construction through foodways in the individual arena. In this section, I first discuss individuals' experiences with foodways that promote a sense of dignity; second, I present individuals' experiences with foodways that violate their sense of dignity.

Positive Impacts to Dignity through Daily Experiences with Foodways

Participants perceive experiences to promote or enhance their sense of dignity in the individual arena through two fundamental aspects of foodways, cultural or familial traditions and the act of role-taking as the provider of food. Every interview participant, regardless of their position in the social hierarchy of food security, discusses traditions related to food that are crucial for cultivating and maintaining their identity and sense of dignity. For some, traditions revolve around holidays and family gatherings; whereas, for others, certain recipes or foodways are simply engrained in their family or personal history. Observing and participating in traditional foodways serves as a connecting thread to uplifting and heartening memories and human connections. Individuals note a certain “pride” or “honor” that is associated with traditional foodways. In cultivating these feelings and ideals, individuals are able to construct their own sense of dignity through recognition of their self-identity.

Family attachment and connection to others is a primary form of cultivating dignity in this way. Many participants fondly recount learning how to cook and prepare food from family members or loved ones, and report feeling a sense of pride in that connection to their family's cultural identity. One fifty-year-old man notes that he enjoys cooking for others because he feels a sense of cultural pride in the foods he is able to prepare for them. When asked how he learned to cook, he responded:

Home-cooking from my mom and grandma, Mexicans, because I was around them for quite a while. The others is just reading and experimenting because I enjoy it. I don't eat a lot, but I like to cook for others...[I enjoy] watching them smile because they've never had it before. I mean, if I made you something from Mexico that you couldn't get in a restaurant here that was authentic, and you liked Mexican, you'd be like, 'Mmmm, how'd you do *that*?!'

For many, culture plays a major role in developing their foodways, and in return, food serves as vehicle for cultivating, maintaining, and passing along their cultural identity to children and others. This was, perhaps, most evident when individuals discuss merging cultural traditions with their partners. One woman explains the ways that her cultural identity with food differs from her husband's, and discusses the ways that they have worked to engrain food traditions from each of their cultures into their family's foodways:

My husband is black. I learned their types of foods, there is a difference, you know...I had never had greens in my life. I had never liked Brussel sprouts. I had never had chitterlings. My mother-in-law makes this cabbage recipe. I had never had ANY of those types of foods. It's totally different, and yes, a little bit cliché, because for their Thanksgiving, it's fried chicken, [laughter], and all these greens. As to where I grew up, my dad and I would hunt our turkey, so it's totally, totally different. We fish a lot, because we love fish. I'm Native American, so I don't have to buy a fishing license, I just have to provide my Indian card...At Thanksgiving, we compromise...I have to have my turkey for Thanksgiving! You can't take the turkey out of eighteen-some years at home. You just can't. So, we do a mixture. I do my foods, and sweet potatoes, and what have you. And then, he makes his greens and what have you. So, we cook together Thanksgiving dinners, and we cook together Christmas dinners, and Easter. At first it was, 'Well, why do we always have to have turkey for Thanksgiving?' 'Well, that's because that's what I grew up with, and that's what we're having!' [Laughter.] And then, we learned to mix what we ate traditionally separate, and brought that together. So, definitely [we attach an identity to those things]. We've made our own memories, and it's been nice, very cool.

Mentions of foodways are especially present in discussions surrounding cultural holidays and the traditions with food that individuals attach. It became increasingly evident that individuals view cultural holidays as an opportunity to develop their own food traditions, which cultivates a strong sense of personal and familial identity. A forty-six-year-old father of two illustrates the ways in which their family maintains an inter-generational family identity through Christmas traditions:

When I say tradition, what I mean by that is my mom used to always fix lasagna. That was our Christmas dinner. Now, I couldn't even begin to tell you why. I don't have a clue. But, that's what she would do. She passed away thirteen years ago, no, fourteen years ago, excuse me. It's one of those—my kids were real little. Well, I'm not going to bet you five dollars, but I bet you can guess what we have for Christmas dinner at my house now! That's where I see the comfort side of it, [as a connection to other people].

Not all participants explicitly rationalize the development of these traditions as cultivating a sense of identity or dignity; however, each individual regards these traditions as permanent fixtures in their family's lives. A mother to two indicates the importance of food traditions in her family:

It's the anticipation of putting it together, and fixing it, and having it ready, and sitting down and enjoying it together. We have the same food every year on Christmas. We have the same food every year on Easter. And I think if we ever change it up, somebody, if not all of us, would be very unhappy. 'What? We're having this? We always have *this*!' So, it's the tradition and the fun of knowing that that's kind of what you're going to have every time.

The permanence of these foodways, and individuals' aversion to stray from these traditions illustrates the embeddedness of food traditions in individuals' lives, and the recognition of self-identity and a sense of dignity that follows.

Though holidays provide an opportune space in the individual arena to easily recognize cultural traditions with food, individuals also discuss foodways that are embedded in day-to-day family practices and experiences. In response to questions regarding "foodways that are important to you or your family," or "types of foods or practices that you strongly identify with," participants were quick to recall memories

surrounding foodways that are engrained in their family and cultural history. Looking back on her life, a grandmother fondly remembers many foodways that she established as traditions within her family. Spending most of her life living on a lower income, her foodways were constrained by her position in the social hierarchy of food. However, even though she struggled with food insecurity throughout her life, she articulates the ways that being in this position, financially and socially, have presented her with the opportunity to use certain foods, such as boxed macaroni and cheese, to develop family traditions and a sense of identity:

My ex-husband would only give me twenty bucks a month for groceries...And, the kids face when I'd pull out the macaroni and cheese—that was just, that's a HAPPY memory. And, to this day, the kids will still call me up, and they'll say, 'Mom, can you make macaroni and cheese and barbecue chicken?' [Laughter.] I mean, and the oldest one is twenty-seven.

Even now, years later, she remains attached to these foodways as a form of her identity. As many others in her position note, on days when she feels particularly “down” or “bad about herself,” she turns to these fond memories of foodways as a means of elevating her sense of dignity. “You know, that’s good memories. And, when I want to experience my memories, I go eat the food.”

Other participants perceive the development of identity and a sense of dignity to involve more than just the food itself. Rather, the cultivation of ideals is engrained in the ways that individuals prepare their food, and the deeper meaning that is imbued in the experiences. For one woman, the construction of dignity through everyday food practices is illustrated best by her grandmother’s baking customs:

I watched her make a German chocolate cake, which I’m not too big of a fan of chocolate cake. But, I used to watch her make German chocolate cakes. That was awesome, too, because she was unique in baking her food, you know, her stuff. She took the time to love it. She just didn’t, just go in there, “Well I got to do this. I got to do this. Well, this person wants that.” She didn’t do that. She took the time to love her food. And, what I mean by that is, she put herself into it. She allowed herself to be a part of the food as if she were the food and the food were on the outside and they

were her. And, they were making it. It was just a different way of looking at things. It was a blessing.

Participants also perceive their sense of dignity to be promoted or elevated through a recognition of their role as the “provider” of food. An ability to provide food for their families, and to do it in ways they deem desirable, fosters a sense of achievement or pride for individuals. One woman recounts a long list of traditional foodways performed by her family that are her “favorite things,” such as her aunt’s broccoli casserole at Christmas, her grandma’s homemade pickles and apple butter, and the way her grandpa makes his waffles. When asked why those things stick out to her as definitive aspects of her family, she became emotional and tearfully responded, “Food is an important staple, I think, in a family, or in any kind of situation. A holiday, or any kind of family gathering, you bring food. It’s like the ultimate gift of love to be able to provide that, you know? To nourish your family.”

During many of the conversations surrounding this idea of being “the provider,” both in interviews and in the field, participants often become visibly expressive. This signifies the deeper emotional and social meanings individuals attach to food. A sixty-year-old-man, who battles hunger daily, states that he takes pride in cooking and providing for others. He notes, “It’s a gift. It’s a blessing. Knowing that you’re actually helping someone take another step for another day...It’s just something I’ve always liked to do.” For many, providing food for others encompasses more than simply providing nutrition or basic sustenance. Instead, providing food for others is a way of elevating both their own, and others’, sense of dignity. When asked how it makes him feel when he is able to provide his children with foods that they like, or foods that make them happy, a father to four who struggles daily with food insecurity responded, “It makes me feel like

the world!” Echoing this sentiment, a mother of four claims that she “absolutely” takes pride in providing food for her family, and notes:

It makes me feel really good, you know? Like I said, taking care of kids, it’s more than just [feeding them]. It’s giving them love, support, and everything that they need to be successful people as they get older, you know? ... I would much rather be in the kitchen [cooking], knowing that it’s so much cheaper just to get dollar sandwiches through the drive through, you know, when I’m having to pay out of pocket for it. So, when I can actually go in the kitchen and prepare some kind of meal, yeah, it makes me feel really good!

Participants also note a sort of empowerment that comes from being able to provide for themselves and their families. One woman remembers a moment where she learned the basics of how to be a “provider” as a sort of inflection point in her life. At thirteen, her grandmother taught her how to use the minimal food resources she had available to feed children she was caring for:

She taught me what to do. She taught me how to problem solve that, basically. You’re not without resources. She came—again, out of a tenant farmer, she and her husband—so, you’re not without resources, it doesn’t take as much. It just means a lot to me. [It taught me that] you can cook for yourself, you don’t have to be reliant on anybody else. You can cook.

Having the means, or ability to provide food for oneself or one’s family is empowering for individuals. Taking the role of ‘the provider’ elevates individuals’ sense of dignity, and cultivates a sense of pride and self-worth. As one young man explains, “I think it’s human nature to have a dignity or pride to get food, especially when we actually hunt food because you went out there to hunt, you got it! Yeah! And, you brought it home to the family. It’s a sense of accomplishment.” A mother of two reaffirms this notion, boasting a sense of pride in her ability to manage resources and provide food, “If the world crashed right now, I can hunt, I can fish, I can skin my own stuff, and I can survive!” In this way, taking on the role of “the provider” is a foodway that individuals view as a critical component of dignity construction.

Negative Impacts to Dignity through Daily Experiences with Foodways

While participants mention lived experiences with foodways as a means of promoting their sense of dignity, individuals acknowledge the flipside of these experiences as a means of violating their sense of dignity. Participants were much more likely to explicitly mention the concept of dignity when discussing how they perceive it to be violated or diminished by a restriction from practicing foodways, than in discussions of dignity being promoted by performing foodways. Whereas participants from a range of social classes note experiences with foodways that elevate their sense of dignity in some way, accounts of one's sense of dignity being degraded in the context of foodways are exclusively experienced by those who struggle with food insecurity. As discussed in the prior chapter, structural inequality in the food system places constraints to opportunities on individuals holding lower positions in the social hierarchy. The aforementioned structural constraints on individuals' ability to act with any real sense of agency is illustrated by an individuals' daily experiences with foodways, or perhaps more appropriately understood as the *restriction* of foodways.

Participants who face barriers to engaging in cultural traditions discuss feeling disconnected from their family and cultural identities. For one mother of four, the ability to participate in cultural foodways has been displaced in her life because she struggles, at a very basic level, to access enough food of any kind. She explains:

I don't really have much of a relationship with food. I eat to survive. I don't enjoy it or anything like that. I don't have that privilege...[Growing up] I was always around different ethnic backgrounds in my family. I grew up Mormon, and I was around a lot of Hispanic [people] and people from India, you know, different foods. I like those kind of things, but I can never afford to make that kind of stuff, or enjoy it, you know?

Another mother, who is the primary homemaker and caregiver to her four children, tearfully notes feeling a sense of shame or dishonor, due to her inability to partake in important cultural holidays:

Well, my job as a stay-at-home mom, as I said, it's not just cooking food and cleaning the house. It's taking care of my kids the way that they need to be taken care of, you know. And, oftentimes, we're left out on certain things. We don't get to participate in certain traditions, and certain holidays, and such, because we don't have the money, you know. So, it makes me feel not quite good enough. [Crying. Kisses her 7-year-old son on top of his head.]

As previously discussed, cultural identity, and the recognition and cultivation of that identity through foodways plays an important role in the construction of individuals' sense of dignity. Many participants who struggle with food insecurity mention experiencing barriers to practicing foodways related to their cultural traditions and holidays. Furthermore, while many agencies and organizations offer food donations for holidays in an attempt to alleviate this disparity, often these donations reflect holidays, traditions, and foodways of white, American, protestant, middle and upper-class culture. Many individuals who face barriers to practicing cultural foodways do not fall into this strict category. The propensity to offer assistance based on cultural identities will be further discussed in the next section regarding daily experiences of dignity cultivation in the institutional arena.

While individuals report developing a self-identity and sense of dignity through an emotional connection to food, individuals who struggle to access food are constrained from being able to practice foodways to which they feel an emotional connection. A sixty-year-old retired, disabled veteran, notes that the amount of money he receives often leaves him with a week every month where he either is forced to live on plain potatoes or rice every day, or simply goes without food at all for days at a time:

My relationship to food is the same. Food has always been something beautiful to me, something I like doing, something I take pride in cooking. You know? Just throwing that slab of ribs on the

grill. [Groans as if he's enjoying a plate of ribs.] But, [long sigh] ...I—I love food. I like to eat, it's just that the habits have changed through growing up—that it's being decreased, the eating habit; even though my wanting it, and thinking about it is still ongoing.

One mother describes how the restriction from being able to practice particular foodways alters her feelings toward food and her own self-identity as an experienced chef and family caregiver:

I loved cooking! I loved making food for everybody. I loved making HEALTHY meals. Like, my chicken broccoli fettucine...But, now we eat stuff like Hamburger Helper, or hot dogs, or lunch meat sandwiches that go further... I got almost twice the amount in food stamps [in Indiana] that I get here. And so, I liked being indulgent. For most of [my son's] life, he was brought up with fresh fruits, fresh vegetables. Out here, apples are like five, six bucks a bag. And, with four kids, you know how quickly a bag of apples goes? ...I monitor what they eat. And, I hate that, too! [Emotional, crying.] ...It kills me as a mom, you know, that they have to knock on my door or come up to me and say, 'Hey Mom, can I eat this?' because they're worried that if they just ate the way that they needed to eat, we wouldn't have any food. And, I love my babies more than life itself, like, that's everything to me, you know? [Very emotional, crying.] And, oftentimes, I've made the choice to not eat so that way they would have enough, you know?

Before moving to Oklahoma, and losing her job as a chef, she “prided” herself on practicing healthy foodways, yet she now experiences significant barriers to being able to prepare healthful meals. Here, it is especially important to note her use of words like “being indulgent” in reference to simply eating healthy, nutritious foods. For those who struggle with food insecurity, eating healthy, nutritious foods is largely seen as a “privilege” or an “indulgence.” As mentioned in the previous section regarding daily experiences in the relational arena, many of the participants who are under-resourced use the phrase, “poor people food” as a common term for describing diets high in starches and lacking in variety. One woman explains,

I grew up mostly in the south, and beans and rice was what the lower class ate. And, I hate to say it in classes, but it is, our world is. That's what poor people ate, and they ate it every day. I mean, that's a knock to your self-esteem, if you don't have variety. I mean, I can't imagine anyone with money eating the same thing every day, three meals a day. Just don't see it happening! And, that feels harsh, and it does lower your self-esteem. I can't describe it to you. It's kind of one of those things, you've had to have been there.

A thirty-six-year-old vegan woman, who is currently reliant on community food pantries due to a shift in job circumstances, explains the extreme difficulty faced by those who have to rely on food assistance and wish to have a healthy diet:

Even if somebody wasn't vegan, if they wanted to live a HEALTHY, you know, basic food groups—it's hard at a food bank. There's A LOT of junk—a lot of processed food, and, that is just not healthy. But, people eat it because they don't have a choice. They either eat it or go hungry. It's sad...I think sometimes [other people] are like, 'Beggars can't be choosy.' But, it's my body, and I'm not going to eat that!

For individuals who feel compelled to live a vegan or vegetarian lifestyle, or even simply a health-conscious lifestyle, this can encompass a large part of their self-identity. When their sense of agency to be able to make decisions regarding everyday food practices is restricted, it produces feelings of shame and self-deprecation. A sixty-one-year-old retired veteran, who lives a vegetarian lifestyle because of “moral reasons,” discusses experiences with related feelings. He mentions that the thought of killing living beings for food just “kind of bothered him.” Somewhat hesitantly, he recounts a time in his life when, faced with homelessness, he was forced to stray from this moral code:

In 1976, I was living under a pier in the sands in Santa Barbara, California. I ran out of money. I was going to college, and I ran out of money...I had a choice between going to the John 3:16 Mission, which lasted about thirty minutes, or not. They were using a loud speaker to preach Christianity at you the whole time. They were just really pounding it on you while you were eating. It reminded me of the movies of the Korean War, where the prisoners are getting indoctrinated with a loud speaker the whole time. So, I went to live in the sand. I lived on the beach. [So, what was food like during that period of time in your life?] I'm real embarrassed to say. It was anything I could catch. That's why I had to stop, because I was catching pigeons, and walking away.

His emotional reluctance to recount this experience illustrates the embeddedness of his vegetarian lifestyle in his sense of identity. As he was forced to go against these deeply held beliefs as a means of survival, his sense of dignity suffered as a result.

When discussing experiences that violate individuals' sense of dignity in the individual arena, participants are most explicit in describing this degradation in relation to their role as the “provider.” Individuals who struggle to provide enough food or

appropriate kinds of food for themselves and others note feeling a lack of pride in oneself, or “being a failure.” A twenty-seven-year-old college student who has struggled off and on throughout his life to access adequate amounts of food explains:

When someone doesn’t have food, I feel like, especially whoever is the bread winner, they might feel a sense of failure...So, just in my experience of looking at people who maybe didn’t have the necessities of life, of just being able to get food whenever they want or need, to the person who can get food anywhere, or any place, or any quality, whenever they want—it’s definitely a different, like, sense of pride or dignity, and identity.

For many people who take pride in their role as the family provider, or caregiver, the inability to adequately provide food results in a sort of downward spiral toward identity decay and dignity loss. One mother, who is the primary wage earner in her household, feels financially constrained by the lack of opportunity to move up in her current job, which is not providing her with the necessary income to support her family. As a result of this constraint, she describes feelings of hopelessness, and self-identifies as a failure in her role as the family provider:

I feel like I’m a failure as a mother because I can’t provide what they need...It gets depressing after a while. And, there’s time’s I’ve cried myself to sleep at night because I feel like I’m failing my children as a parent because I can’t give them what they want, as far as food. They can’t get the kind of food that they want, or snacks, or whatever, you know. And, it’s just like, there’s nothing I can do about it! It’s just, do this, or, you know. So, it gets depressing after a while. It hurts. Yeah, it’s really hard.

When asked how these constraints may impact their sense of dignity, participants relate this sense of identity decay and dignity loss to feelings of worthlessness attached to the inability to provide *basic* human needs, such as food. One woman who is currently reliant on food pantries due to unforeseen medical costs, which continue to rise, describes how this period of food insecurity has affected her and her husband’s sense of dignity:

I know that it bothered my husband A LOT, as a man, to not be able to provide for his family when he needed to, you know. And, he was working for the college. That was really hard. And, that goes against your dignity BIG time! I mean, it affects what choices you make, and what you do with those choices, and the hard choices that you have to make. That’s a big dignity—that goes almost hand in hand. If you can’t provide with food and the basic needs, that’s self-esteem, that’s everything! That’s almost every major emotion that you do every day. And, when you can’t do

that, it takes away your dignity, it takes away your pride, it takes away ALL that. And then, you feel defeated. That goes hand in hand, far out—goes hand in hand.

Another woman facing similar circumstances, explains how she perceives her sense of dignity to be impacted by these experiences:

[It's] pride in oneself, their accomplishment, you know. And not just food, but like healthcare and everything that this encompasses. I think that in order to feel like a normal, productive member of society, you need to be able to have BASIC human needs, food, water, clothing, shelter, you know. [Very emotional, crying.] ...So, dignity? I guess, it's a lot harder to have self-worth when you have to struggle SO hard for basic human needs.

The restriction of agency, mediated by the structural constraints to opportunities, materializes in individuals' daily experiences with foodways, as they are restricted from being able to perform or practice foodways in particular ways. This results in a sort of identity decay and a loss of a sense of dignity for many individuals who are subjugated in the social hierarchy of food security.

DIGNITY CONSTRUCTION IN THE INSTITUTIONAL ARENA

The institutional arena encapsulates daily experiences with organizations, agencies, and government programs, where individuals perceive the basic structures, processes, and practices of these institutions to impact their sense of dignity. Whereas the individual arena primarily encompasses foodways, and the relational arena centers on experiences with food access, I find that the institutional arena influences individuals sense of dignity through experiences using institutional services related to both foodways and food access. In this arena, many of the experiences that influence individuals' sense of dignity with foodways and food access mentioned in the former two arenas are legitimized as practices, rules, and regulations at the institutional level.

Due to the nature of social assistance programs existing in the community at the time of data collection, very few individuals reported having experiences in the

institutional arena that elevate their sense of dignity. In fact, participants only mentioned one specific experience that promotes their sense of dignity in the institutional arena at this time, which is characterized by the ability to volunteer or provide some form of aid at community food programs and agencies. By “giving back,” participants from all ranks of the social hierarchy report feeling a sense of empowerment and pride in their work. On the contrary, individuals who struggle with food insecurity and rely on these programs report several types of experiences in the institutional arena that negatively impact their sense of dignity. Therefore, the analysis that follows touches briefly on individuals’ experiences with dignity promotion through volunteer work at community organizations. I then focus on the ways that individuals who use food assistance programs perceive experiences with food access and foodways in the institutional arena to negatively impact their sense of dignity.

Positive Impacts to Dignity through Daily Experiences with Volunteering

At the community-level, all of the food assistance programs, both food pantries and meal-sites, are volunteer-driven, meaning these organizations and programs rely on volunteers from the community to operate. At many sites, a range of community members act as volunteers, including both those who use the services provided and those who do not. While the experiences of community volunteers who are not using the services are generally reported as positive experiences, they are rarely framed as elevating or enhancing their sense of dignity. However, for individuals who are using services, volunteering offers a sense of empowerment, and positively impacts their sense of dignity.

For many, giving back is a way to alleviate some of the shame they feel by needing to rely on services. As one woman who has benefitted from food pantries and homeless shelters throughout her life notes, “I like being a part of helping people. And also, [I like] to let them know I’m not just taking all the time. You know, it’s a way of give back.” This was a common theme among participants who express a desire to help at places in the community. For others, volunteering is a way to cultivate a sense of community into the pantry. This is especially true at one church-run pantry. Here, some of the pantry guests, who also act as volunteers, use the church kitchen to cook breakfast for everyone who shows up to help on food distribution day. The director explains how they all eat together before opening to guests, which creates a strong sense of community among guests and volunteers, with everyone working together toward a common goal. In this way, guests of the pantry also gain a sense of ownership in the organization, helping to enhance their sense of pride and dignity in the work they do. Similarly, a forty-eight-year-old woman, who has been both receiving food from a community food pantry and volunteering at the pantry for several years, notes how being a part of the volunteer group gives her a sense of purposefulness:

I feel like I’m not just a body. I feel like I’m a part of the team, or a part of the church... So, that, you know—getting a bond with other people is important to me, because I’m a people person. I’m not just a person that’s, ‘Oh, well, I’m getting this free.’ No. Give me something to do. Let me help out. Let me direct, or do something. Come on! I’m getting this free—it’s not about being free all the time, because you’re not necessarily going to get everything free in life. But, if you do, and you’re able to, at least give something back to the community.

Other individuals mention how experiences with needing to use services has inspired them to start giving back through volunteer work. A fifty-year-old man who only recently started using food pantries, due to an unexpected job loss, mentions how using pantry services helped him realize how it is “pleasing to help others.” He notes, “You get so

busy in your daily life, you forget to help. And then, somebody actually helps you and you're like, 'Hmm, maybe I could do that.'”

Negative Impacts to Dignity through Daily Experiences in the Institutional Arena

In the institutional arena, individuals who struggle with food insecurity perceive their sense of dignity to be negatively impacted by organizational structures, practices, and processes, which impact their sense of dignity in two primary ways. First, the social and cultural orientation of the basic structure of organizations and social assistance programs, which are often characterized by white, middle-class, protestant values, ignores the preferences and concerns of those using the services in relation to institutional operations. Second, the rigid rules and bureaucratic processes of institutions often contribute to dehumanizing and degrading experiences for those seeking access to food.

As previously discussed in the section regarding daily experiences in the relational arena, participants who use food assistance in the community recognize that social relations at food pantries are characterized by asymmetrical encounters, where those who are using the services are subjugated and set apart as “the Other.” In the institutional arena, asymmetrical social encounters are legitimized by organizational operations that fail to take into account the needs and preferences of individuals seeking assistance. In fact, most participants in this study claim their involvement in our discussions in the field and during research interviews are the first time any of them have had the opportunity to express their feelings or share their experiences with using food assistance. A sixty-one-year-old pantry recipient, involved with food assistance programs in the community for a decade, states:

This is the first time in pretty much ten years that I've been associated with the food banks that anybody has really shown any interest in what the people actually thought. So, that's why I'm here...it's the first time that anybody's really asked anybody involved with the food bank program, the recipients, about really what's going on...[Recipients] just don't voice [concerns and insights] to anybody else that's involved because they don't know who's really doing something, and who's listening, or who's not listening, and what anybody's going to do.

Participants note a general sense that their personal and cultural values are not only unimportant to organizational leaders, but they are not welcomed, and many feel they would be harshly policed and deemed “ungrateful” if they were to make criticisms known. Some even mention that they fear they would be denied services and food resources if they fail to conform to institutional values. As one man put it, “It's real easy to get eliminated from the system.”

In this community, as is common in many areas of the state, most of the food pantries are organized and run by local Christian churches. For individuals who follow religions or lifestyles that do not align with the religious practices of the churches, the experiences they have with trying to access food brings additional injurious impacts to their sense of dignity. Some individuals describe the experiences at pantries as simply “uncomfortable” or “somewhat demeaning,” such as this forty-eight-year-old woman who explains how religious practices are forced on food recipients:

You know, it's a little uncomfortable that the churches do prayers, and you know, all of that, if you're not Christian. They do have a tendency to only want to treat—to only help Christians. I'm a Unitarian Universalist, and you just don't say anything for that, you know. But, you can definitely see the Muslim women are treated a little differently. And, they do absolutely violate their eating protocols with, you know, no pork, and no—you know, I find that kind of sad.

In such instances, individuals are not barred from accessing food and other resources at the institutions, yet their cultural and religious traditions, including the various foodways and restricted diets that are attached to traditions, are completely disregarded. As discussed in the previous section regarding daily experiences in the individual arena, cultural identity and the recognition and cultivation of that identity through food plays an

important role in the construction of individuals' sense of dignity. In the institutional arena, individuals experience a sense of dignity violation when the organizations, agencies, and churches in charge of distributing food and other basic resources disregard individuals' cultural and religious values. However, other individuals report experiencing damages to their sense of dignity due to outright discrimination and exclusion from services if they do not conform to the values that are embedded in the institutions. Such is the case with one woman, who sought food assistance for herself, her wife, and their children:

We called the church and they wouldn't help us because we were gay. They said they could not help us. We've had that happen a few times...and I've only lived here for a year and a half. They put us on hold, and then they ask a series of questions, and then, they'll ask your spouse's name. My wife proceeded to tell them, that, you know, 'No, we're married. We're a couple.' And they said, 'But, it's another woman.' And it took them a minute to get it, and the guy was—you could tell he was rather embarrassed that he even could not put two and two together. But, they ultimately came back and said they did not have enough funds to help us. Even though, prior to, they said they could.

As a safeguard against this type of discrimination, many individuals claim that they have to find ways to conform to institutional values, at least at a surface-level. Often, participants discuss this kind of preservation tactic as just “going along with the game,” “playing the game,” or just “doing whatever is necessary” to obtain the basic resources they need. One woman describes how these tactics are a necessary means to an end:

I've gotten to where I just go along with the game of it. I think some people find it very offensive that you're being expected—[One pantry] is real bad about doing a sermon before you can get food. And, if you miss it, they kind of turn you away. They say they're full, or something like that, if you miss the service. So, that's uncomfortable. It's just like the people that bring you a bag of food, and say, 'Okay, you can have the bag of food, but you've got to come to our church.' That's bribery! Why do you need to bribe somebody to go to your church? It makes no sense.

Another individual compares his experiences with accessing food in these places to that of “training a dog”:

Yeah, you don't have any choice! If you want to get some food, if you want to eat, you have to be there, and go [bows head], and raise your head at the right time, and go, 'Amen.' You know, you have to play the game. [Laughter.] That's essentially all it is, is doing what you need to do, so they

think you're doing what you need to do to get something. Kind of like training a dog, I guess. The dog's not going to do anything unless you give them a treat.

This forced compliance to institutional values and practices, as well as the complete disregard of individuals' preferred values and customs, is noted by participants as demeaning, dehumanizing, and a primary influence of dignity degradation in the institutional arena.

Individuals argue that the rigid rules and bureaucratic processes of these organizations and social assistance programs foster dehumanizing and degrading experiences, as well. As noted by Jacobson et al. (2009), food pantries are often structured in ways that do not promote individuals' sense of self-worth or value. This is well illustrated by the lengthy wait times imposed by institutional practices. In general, under-resourced individuals report spending a large portion of their time simply waiting in lines for social services and other basic needs. This aspect of social programs is noted as dehumanizing by many participants, as they discuss the demeaning and humiliating processes of accessing resources that make them feel like they are "just part of the herd." One recipient, a retired veteran who relies on social services and food pantries to survive, describes how these bureaucratic processes, which lack any kind of personal engagement, lead to a sense of being cast aside as an unimportant, disregarded member of the community:

It's kind of demeaning...[Food recipients] have just kind of accepted their situation, just toeing the line, just sort of shuffling through like little zombies, doing what they have to do to survive...It's a system that—it's not necessarily the individuals involved, it's just the whole situation, being there. For instance, the one I go to, you have to show up about 5:00 in the morning and put your name on a list to get anything at all. Then, you go away for a while. Then, about 8:00, you show up and the food bank gives you a ticket, and depending what time on the list that you signed up on, then you come back at 10:00, and they might start the food bank, then. So, you know, it's not just a quick process, it's kind of an all-day kind of thing.

The important distinction, here, is that this individual does not attribute experiences that impact his sense of dignity to interactions or treatment from other individuals, even those who are in charge of organizations and agencies. Instead, experiences of dignity construction in the institutional arena are influenced by the bureaucratic structure of organizations, and “just the whole situation, being there.”

Beyond the wait-times that are incurred, participants also discuss other bureaucratic processes that can be dehumanizing in their quest for food, including the forms and paperwork that have to be filled out and the impersonal, unrealistic way that pantries calculate the level of need within households. As noted in the first chapter of analysis, a common social narrative exists that many people receiving food assistance are “taking advantage of the system.” In response, many pantries in the area have implemented a centralized software system to track food recipients, which requires recipients to fill out paperwork that details their contact information, income, identification numbers, and household size. Although some pantry directors cite using the information stored in this system to offer better forms of assistance for recipients, such as making notes of food allergies and other diet restrictions, the use of the forms is viewed as somewhat dehumanizing by many participants. One pantry director in the community who deliberately chose not to use this system explains why the strict enforcement of this software serves to degrade recipients’ sense of dignity:

I maintain if you could shop at Wal-Mart only if you filled out that form that nobody would shop at Wal-Mart. People would fill them out [at pantries] because they saw this as an impediment to getting groceries...*I* would’ve been uncomfortable filling out one of those forms, and I wonder how many of the food bank administrators in the area have filled out one of those forms and put their information in [the database]. I bet none of them have. I wouldn’t want to... You know, if I wanted to know if someone coming to my food bank on a regular basis were going to other food banks, would that interest me? That would interest me somewhat. But, would I cut them off from getting their groceries? No, I wouldn’t. Coming to a food bank, including our food bank, isn’t all that much fun. I mean, people don’t come here to be entertained. They come here to get groceries.

And, if they're going to other places to get groceries in addition to here to get groceries, my interpretation of that is they need the groceries. So, give them groceries! ...In filling out the form, there *is* a dignity factor.

In many ways, these forms and paperwork are simply an indicator of the bureaucratic nature of food assistance programs and the impersonality inherent in the structures, which debases individuals by turning them into numbers or “cases.” Yet, the procedural systems and paperwork also act as genuine barriers to accessing adequate amounts of food, as recipients argue the forms fail to accurately represent their situation, life circumstances, and the level of need they experience. For both the food pantries in the community and the SNAP program at the state and federal level, the forms individuals must complete require a statement of income, yet fail to account for other basic expenditures, such as healthcare and housing, which can be monumental costs that absorb large portions of individuals’ income. As discussed in the first chapter of analysis regarding financial resources as a structural constraint, unexpected healthcare costs, spurred by the development of chronic illnesses or loss of health insurance, consumes a large portion of individuals’ income. Yet, this cost is unaccounted for in the institutional arena. One woman, explains how this discrepancy in bureaucratic paperwork leaves many of her and her husband’s needs unmet:

It’s just trying to pay bills, and trying to pay rent, and trying to buy food, and trying to do this—it just seems like, you know, the government, they think \$1,724 a month is a lot to live on, and we don’t get food stamps because we make too much money...It makes me feel mad! I know that they think \$1,724 is a lot of money, but when you’ve got to pay rent, and you’ve got to pay a car payment, and you’ve got to pay car insurance, and you’ve got to buy food, and you’ve got to pay bills, that’s not a lot of money! But, they say it is. And, it really makes me mad. It does. But, you can’t do nothing about it...what can you do? They tell you that you make too much money. There’s nothing we can do.

While a lack of consideration of the genuine financial situation faced by under-resourced individuals acts as a dehumanizing agent in the institutional arena, individuals also note that harm is exacerbated by the amount of time it takes to adhere to bureaucratic

processes, which is often not worth the low amount of resources given in return. A sixty-eight-year-old retiree explains:

I'm low enough income, I still get SNAP. But, they expect an elderly to live and buy bread, and milk and stuff on fifteen dollars a month—they can kiss it in the wind! It ain't even worth the time and all the paperwork that's involved. They need to change that system...I do have it. But, I don't know whether I'll sign back up next time, because it isn't worth my time!

Daily experiences in the institutional arena are also characterized by social environments that often promote feelings of hopelessness and depression for individuals who occupy these spaces. Typically, most food pantries and other social assistance agencies do not cultivate environments that promote a sense of self-worth or empowerment. One woman, who has lived in homeless shelters and has had to rely on food pantries for basic necessities at various points in her life, describes the general environment in these spaces:

Most people that go there, it seems like they look down to me. They kind of look—some of them look kind of depressed, you know, to me. It's almost, when you look around, it kind of looks like a hopelessness in a sense...Now, one place bothered me because it seemed like I did get sick at one...people looked like they were kind of sick. There was one guy who was just sneezing and stuff, and I was like, "Uh oh," you know, and the place was crowded and I was trying to find a seat—and it seemed like, I mean...that kind of bothered me...A lot of places that give, make the people feel down. I don't know if there's something that can be done to make it more of a better atmosphere or something.

The spaces agencies inhabit are often dark, dirty, and crowded, which only exacerbates the humiliation and “downward spiral toward identity decay and dignity loss” that is experienced in the individual arena by those who feel ashamed by not being able to provide food for their families through means they deem acceptable. One mother who has recently been forced to begin using these community food pantries describes how the environments of places impacts her on an emotional level:

I see mothers bringing in children in thirty-two-degree weather that have no shoes or socks on, that have no coats on, that have, you know. It smells. There are dirty people. It's overwhelming. It's overwhelming! And, I used to not go because I always thought that somebody else out there needed that food more than us. [Emotional, crying.] And then, it got to the point where I couldn't do that anymore. So, it just—when I'm there, I'm like, I don't want to be there. [Very emotional.]

It's heartbreaking! The whole situation. I never thought, in my life, that I would be on disability at thirty years old, not able to work, not able to provide for myself or my kids, never in a million years. I went to school. I went to college. And, I can't use any of it, none of it. It's a sad, sad situation. And, it's so embarrassing.

Even though individuals acknowledge experiences in the institutional arena to have deleterious effects on their sense of dignity, many don't blame the organizations and agencies, outright. Rather, participants point to larger issues of structural inequality, such as those discussed in the first chapter of analysis, as the underlying forces shaping their experiences. One of the most notable examples of recognition of structural inequality's impact on organizational processes is described by this mother, who begins the account by sharing a disturbing and demoralizing experience with food access at an outdoor food event for pantry recipients:

I had to get there forty-five minutes early just to be the fifth person in line. And, that's forty-five minutes of standing in the hot 90-degree weather with my tiny little dude, just so we can get some, AIR QUOTES, fresh fruit and vegetables, because they weren't fresh, by any means. And, soon as she said the word, 'Okay,' everybody rushed the table. And, there were so many hands grabbing for whatever they could reach. They practically trampled my child in the process, to try and get to the table...like bumping, elbowing, pushing people out of the way to try and grab some stuff for their families! I mean, it reminded me of Black Friday shopping, the way that these people were acting. They were like animals. You know, where I had to put my own child in front of me and block my arms around him to make sure that nobody knocked him over because they want to get a slice of bread!

She attributes the extreme behaviors exhibited by other recipients to the fact that people are not being given enough food. She argues that if people were given adequate amounts of food, then they would not have reacted that way, stating, "They wouldn't have *fought* for FOOD! It's the most unbelievable thing I've ever seen...It's on the verge of the obscene." Yet, she still contends this is not necessarily the fault of the organization, noting forces of structural inequality as the basis instead:

The programs, themselves, can't necessarily be blamed, because they're being put there with the right intentions. But, good intentions pave the road to hell. Like, just because the intention is there for them to do a good thing, why the scarcity of the food? Maybe the budget isn't high enough for the area, and how many people are, in fact, on assistance here! You know? I mean, it's not just diverse families like me and my kids. It's everyone, you know, that aren't getting enough...But, there's just not enough! There really isn't.

Similarly, participants also note forces of structural inequality that underlie negative experiences with bureaucratic processes; specifically, experiences with dignity construction that occur alongside the bureaucratic processes of applying for SNAP benefits. One woman explains the deep frustration that she's felt with the processes:

It is a LONG process...They treat you like crap. They are rude. They are—and, once again, I understand. I'm sure it's probably very frustrating, all the paperwork and everything that they're trying to do. But, we're frustrated, too, on the outside of the doors. Because, we feel like it's not getting taken care of in a timely fashion. They give us a deadline. You have to have this turned in by this date, or you lose [the opportunity to qualify]. Well, shouldn't that go the other way around? I've turned in my stuff, you should have a deadline to have us taken care of, have our stuff processed.

As unfair as she argues this system is for the recipients, she quickly turns to forces of structural inequality that create a system that is equally unfair to the agency, itself. She asserts that budget cuts at the state level have forced layoffs within the agency, forcing workers to take on heavier than average loads:

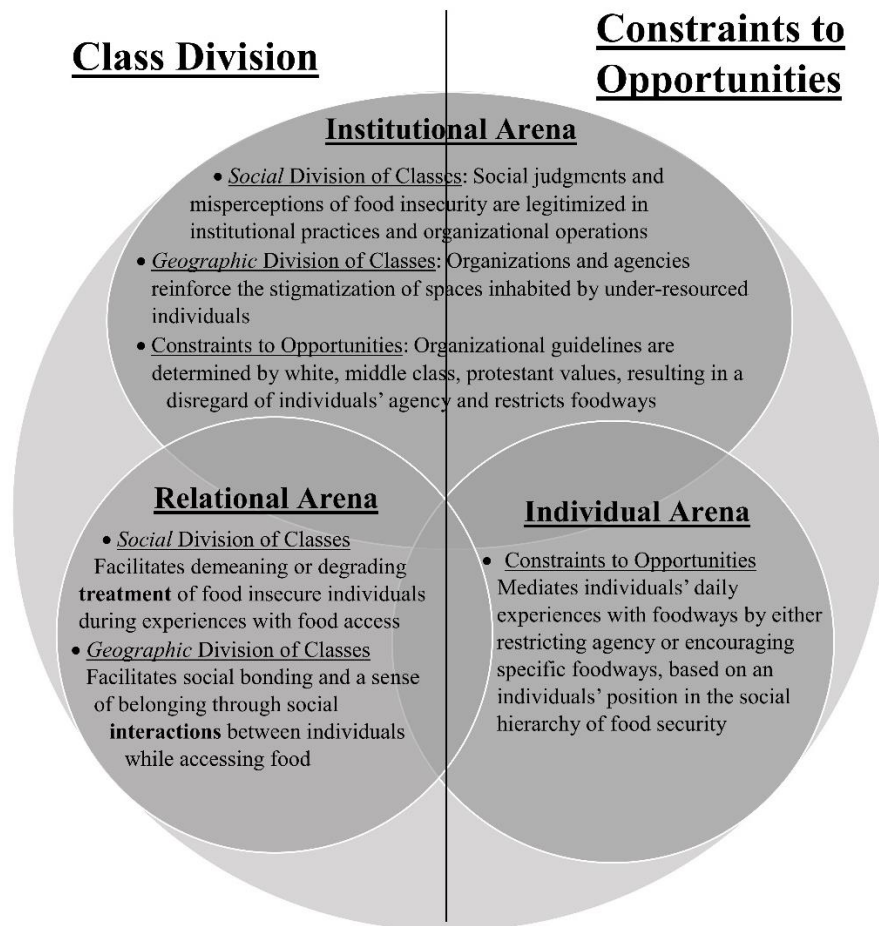
I mean, all these people are in fear of their jobs, my brother-in-law included. He works for DHS. I feel that took a big hit by the budget cuts, and losing the DHS workers...They're cutting all of these people...So, you have people that lost their jobs. Once they lose their jobs, once again, guess what they're going to be doing? They're going to be asking for assistance because they lost their job. It's a big circle. It's a never-ending cycle. And whoever—I don't know who needs to fix that, [Laughter.] But, it needs to be fixed and looked at; these decisions, how they impact everybody, the workers and us.

Out of all three social arenas where individuals perceive daily experiences to impact their sense of dignity, I find that the institutional arena provides the most visible display of how daily experiences with dignity cultivation are facilitated by structural inequality. It is in this arena where individuals are most likely to recognize food insecurity as a systemic issue that must be confronted at the structural level. As noted by one woman, through heavy tears, “We’re all just humans, you know. We’re all just trying to make it. And in a *system* that is flawed, severely, in all different kinds of categories, I

feel like they're setting us up for failure. So, yeah, that's it. That's all I have to say. In a broken system, they set you up for failure.”

The analysis presented in this chapter regarding individuals' daily experiences of dignity construction in three distinct social arenas builds on the foundational understanding of structural inequality in the food system presented in Chapter V. Expanding the conceptual model presented in the former chapter (*See Figure 1*), Figure 2 provides a more in-depth representation of dignity construction in the relational, individual, and institutional arena, as well as the ways daily experiences in these arenas are influenced by structural inequality in the food system.

Figure 2. In-Depth Analytical Conceptual Framework: *Socio-Structural Aspects Mediating Daily Experiences in Social Arenas*



Class division in the social hierarchy of food security underlies individuals' experiences in the relational arena in two primary ways, social division and geographic division. First, the judgments and misperceptions of food insecurity, perpetuated by the division of classes into different social strata, materialize in individuals' daily social encounters while accessing food. Second, the division of classes into different physical geographies facilitates daily experiences with food access that foster a sense of belonging, and social bonding, within classes. Constraints to opportunities, determined by individuals' position in the social hierarchy of food security, mediate daily experiences with foodways, and either restrict or encourage individuals' agency and ability to practice certain foodways that are critical to developing identity and a sense of dignity. In the institutional arena, individuals perceive daily experiences with both food access and foodways to be mediated by both key aspects of structural inequality, class division and constraints to opportunities. The bureaucratic nature of organizations and agencies legitimizes the experiences of dignity construction in the relational and individual arena as guidelines, procedures, and practices that impact individuals' sense of dignity in the institutional arena. In the following chapter, I present a typology of dignity construction in the social hierarchy of food security, discuss the limitations of this study, and suggest directions for future research.

CHAPTER VII

DISCUSSION OF A NEW TYPOLOGY AND CONCLUSION

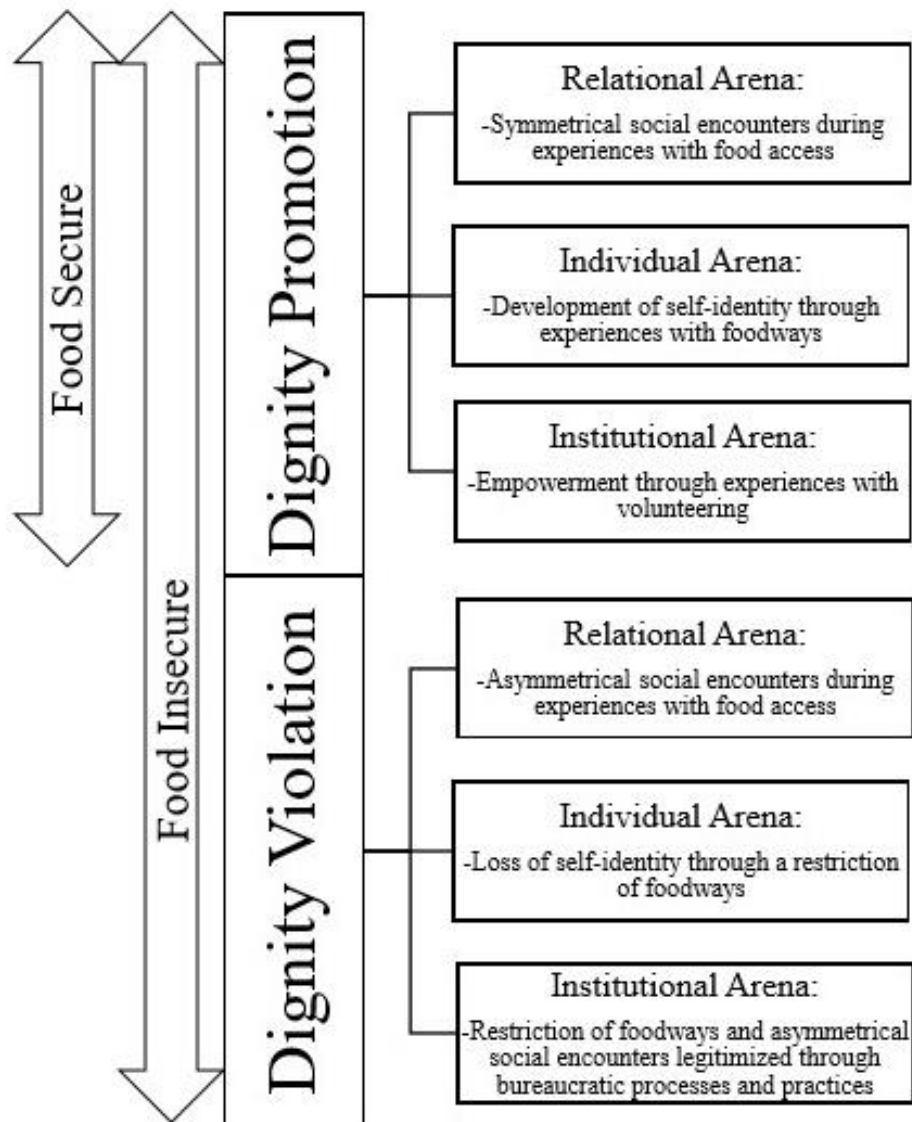
Broadly, this research explores the interrelated hierarchies of food security and human dignity, as well as the processes and practices that allow hierarchies to become normalized as a natural state of the social structure. A social hierarchy is recognized and reproduced by food processes and practices, and characterized by social inequalities between those who suffer the injurious effects of living with food insecurity and those who are privileged to live with food security. Just as the food justice framework considers the core tenants of food justice to be divided along lines of structural inequality, the lines of dignity cultivation, likewise, are determined by inequality in the sense of whose dignity is promoted and whose is violated.

When I began this research, my initial intent was to explore how individuals' daily, lived experiences with food could cultivate or preserve their sense of dignity. Through the process of exploring individuals' daily experiences, it became increasingly clear that certain aspects of the basic structure of society act as prime mediating factors of social constructions of dignity. Specifically, inequality at the structural level of the food system, illustrated by a social hierarchy of food security, facilitates a different set of

daily experiences with food access and foodways for individuals holding different positions in the social hierarchy. Exploring structural inequality in the food system provides a basic foundation for understanding dignity construction through individuals' daily experiences with food. It is the structure of society which determines individuals' positions within the social hierarchy of food security, and in turn, confines their material conditions and life experiences in relation to this social position.

In consideration of structurally mediated experiences with food access and foodways, my findings suggest that as a person's position in the social hierarchy of food security rises, so, too, does the likelihood of having daily experiences that *positively* impact individuals' sense of dignity. The inverse is equally true. Individuals occupying lower positions in the social hierarchy have a higher likelihood of experiencing daily events that *negatively* impact individuals' sense of dignity. Findings elucidate a typology of daily experiences of dignity construction within the social hierarchy of food security (*Figure 3*). Within this typology, individuals at every level of the social hierarchy of food security have daily experiences with food that positively impact their sense of dignity; yet, as a group, individuals holding lower positions in the social hierarchy are exclusively subjected to daily experiences with food that negatively impact individuals' sense of dignity.

Figure 3. Typology of Daily Experiences of Dignity Construction within the Social Hierarchy of Food Security



The implications of these findings are two-fold. First, this typology reveals a strong relationship between food practices and processes and human dignity by showing a distinct division of inequality that is apparent in individuals' daily experiences with dignity construction in the context of food access and foodways. In earlier chapters, I

argued that understanding the relationship between dignity and food must be an integral component of food justice research for any efforts toward reframing food security as a basic human right to be successful. With this new understanding of the dignity-food relationship, food justice advocates can begin to engage with this typology as a means of propelling food security toward ameliorative policy action. At an individual level, the typology can be used to restructure community programs and agencies to alter daily experiences that violate individuals' sense of dignity in the context of food access and foodways. To better advocate for food justice at the large-scale policy level, food justice work must look to the forces of structural inequality that underlie experiences of dignity degradation in each of the three social arenas.

An appeal to consider structural forces leads me to the second implication of the research findings. The findings of this research suggest the concept of dignity is essential to study in regard to food justice not only because it is a critical component of human rights; but also, as a social condition, dignity is a key indicator that points to larger structural deficiencies and inequalities that must be confronted before any form of justice can be achieved. As previously mentioned, the food justice framework considers structural inequality to be a primary impediment to creating a more just food system. By exploring individuals' daily experiences with dignity construction, researchers can discover the deeply embedded issues of structural inequality that act as barriers to achieving food justice.

The case study nature of the project presents limitations to generalizability, yet many of the daily experiences of dignity construction reported by individuals relate directly to theoretical notions previously considered by other scholars, or are affirmed in

prior studies of similar circumstances, helping to bolster the robustness of the findings and the development of a typology. This project serves as a first step to consider the complex experiences related to dignity in food procurement. While the analytical conceptual model, (*Figures 1 and 2*), and typology, (*Figure 3*), offer a start at defining and evaluating the concepts, there is still much to be explored. Each of the social arenas considered in this study—relational, individual, and institutional—as well as the structural forces that underlie experiences in these arenas, could each be developed into individual projects.

Furthermore, ample opportunity for future research exists beyond further development of the concepts presented in this paper. While class division and constraints to opportunities are key mediators of impacts to dignity, other forces of inequality and structural violence are likely to facilitate similar experiences for individuals. Specifically, research is needed that focuses on issues of intersectionality. Though intersectionality can be addressed in a number of ways, two main components should be specifically addressed—1) looking at the intersectionality of race, ethnicity, gender, and class inherent in food processes and practices; 2) exploring the ways that forces of structural violence, such as racism and sexism, facilitate individuals' daily experiences with dignity construction in the context of food justice related issues.

Future work should also consider dignity construction in the context of food sovereignty, a concept that arose in discussions with participants in this study. A more thorough interrogation is necessary to consider how individuals' sense of dignity is impacted through experiences with food sovereignty. Additionally, since the institutional arena provides the most visible display of dignity construction facilitated by structural

inequality and recognition of food insecurity as a systemic issue, future research should build on these findings by looking to policies at the local, state, and national level. It is likely that forces of structural violence mediate policy framing at the all levels in relation to issues of food insecurity, which could have compelling implications for impacts to individuals' sense of dignity. Finally, while this project explored the social construction of dignity in the context of food justice, specifically, the typology provides an initial framework for considering dignity construction in the context of other social justice issues.

This project responds to researchers' calls for additional study regarding the critical relationship between dignity and food, and contributes valuable information to the field of food justice research. Until now, the concept of dignity has been largely understudied in food justice scholarship. This study begins to fill this gap in knowledge, and reveals the crucial relationship between human dignity and food processes and practices by exploring the emotional and symbolic dimensions of food. By building on the understanding of the dignity-food relationship developed in this project, food justice work can begin to restructure the social order at a societal level to promote fairness, equality, and a greater sense of dignity for all individuals, regardless of their position in the social hierarchy of food security.

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APPENDICES

ATTACHMENT A: PHASE ONE INTERVIEW GUIDE

Semi-structured Interview Guide

Personal, Cultural, and Social Dimensions of Food Practices “Let’s begin by talking about your personal and family history...”

Tell me about food in your home when you were growing up.

What did food mean to your family?

Are there any food practices or foodways that you remember as important? [Foodways = cultural, social and economic practices relating to the production and consumption of food. The term often refers to the intersection of food in culture, traditions, and history.]

Did your family have a garden or farm? What did your family grow?

Tell us about a favorite memory from your childhood involving food.

What makes this memory stick out to you most?

At any point growing up, did you or your family experience periods of food insecurity?

[*Food Insecurity* refers to a period or periods of time where you have limited or uncertain access to adequate food.]

What were those times like?

How did you or your family cope during these times?

How do you think these periods impacted your own relationship to food?

“I’d like to move on from talking about your history with food, to discuss your current experiences with food...”

Tell me a little about your daily experiences with food.

What does food mean to you?

Where and how are meals served and eaten in your home now?

How does this differ from when you were growing up?

How is it similar?

How often do you eat at restaurants, or get take-out?

What are your favorite foods (or meals) to eat?

Who is primarily responsible for preparing or providing food for your home?

[If it is participant]

What does it mean to you to be able to do this for yourself or others?

[If it is someone else]

What does it mean to you to have someone that will do this for you?

How important is it to you to have healthy meals for you or your family?

What types of foods do you consider to be “healthy” or “not healthy”?

Are there any food practices or foodways that are important to you or your family?

What do these food practices or foodways mean to you?

Tell us about the types of places you go to purchase or obtain food for your home.

How often do you go to these places?

How do you choose the places you go to? (Cost, Convenience, Quality, Food Options, etc.)

How do you choose what food to get? (Cost, Food Preferences, Convenience, Food Quality, Diet Requirements, Nutrition, health etc.)

How important is it to you to have a choice when it comes to what type of food you can bring home?

What are some of the barriers that may keep you from being able to choose the foods you’d like to have?

Describe what your experiences are like at the places you go to get food.

What are the interactions like between you and other shoppers/guests?

What are the interactions like between you and the workers?

How are you treated at these places?

What are some things you like about these places?

What are some things you don’t like?

Right now, or in the past year, have you experienced periods of food insecurity?

What has that experience been like?

Are you currently, or have you ever been, a participant of a food assistance program (e.g. SNAP, WIC, Pantry, Bank etc.)?

How did you learn about these programs?

What are your general feelings toward these programs?

Did these programs change your personal relationship to food in any way?

Describe an experience (or experiences) with using these programs that stick out to you in your memory.

How difficult is it for you to get groceries when you need them?
What are some of the reasons why you feel like it is (or isn't) difficult?

I. Community Impacts of Food Programs

“I want to take a break now from personal perspectives and talk a little bit about community impacts of food programs...”

Tell us about the food pantries in your community.

How accessible do you think food pantries are for community members?
(Geography/transportation, hours of operation, number of locations, etc.)

What types of food are offered?

Are people given a choice of what foods they get?

How do you think this might affect guests of the pantry?

How do food pantries compare to grocery stores in the community?

How successful do you feel community food pantries are at addressing food insecurity?
Why or why not?

Are there certain pantries or programs that are more used than others?

Why do think this is? (E.g. accessibility reasons, interactions at these places, knowledge of existence, etc.)

How do people who use food pantries feel when making use of this strategy to get food?

What do you think the general public's perception is of food assistance such as food pantries or SNAP/WIC programs?

Do you agree or disagree with those perceptions? Why?

What are some of the reasons that you feel the way that you do about food assistance?

What do you think are some of the reasons others may feel differently?

Do you think food assistance programs make guests aware of available resources in your community?

In your experience, how clear are the guidelines for qualifying for food assistance?

Do you think people are generally aware of who qualifies and who does not? Why?

Do food assistance programs promote awareness of food insecurity in your community?
In what ways?

Do food systems work to reduce food insecurity in your community?

What are some ways you think food assistance could be improved in your community?

II. Community and Organizational Strategies for Building Food Programs
(For Board members of community food programs and Volunteers at community food pantries)

Please talk about your involvement with food assistance programs.
Why did you get involved? How long?
What is your involvement?
What organizations have you worked with?
What is it about the nature of food assistance in your community that encouraged you to get involved?

What is your role in existing food programs?

What do you think about the development of choice-based food programs?

How has the FRC (or other choice based food assistance effort) been developed?

Have organizations worked together?
What have your experiences been with coalitions and coalition building?
Alliances? Conflicts?

What collaborative strategies have worked? Have not worked?

What does the future hold for community based food assistance efforts?

III. General background information

“May I please request some demographic information about you?”

Age (year of birth)
Sex
Race
Education level
Occupation
Marital Status
Number of people in home
Income Bracket (please select the letter of the category applying to you)
a. Less than \$15,000
b. \$15,000-\$30,000
c. \$30,000-\$45,000
d. \$45,000-\$60,000
e. \$60,000-\$75,000
f. \$75,000-\$90,000
g. \$90,000-\$100,000
h. More than \$100,000

Is there anything I did not talk about that you would like to address?

ATTACHMENT B: PHASE TWO INTERVIEW GUIDE

Semi-structured Interview Guide

I'd like for you to start by telling me about your experiences with food assistance programs (e.g. SNAP, WIC, Pantry, Bank etc.)?

What programs have you used?

How long have you used them?

How did you learn about these programs?

What are your general feelings toward these programs?

Did these programs change your personal relationship to food in any way?

Describe an experience (or experiences) with using these programs that stick out to you in your memory.

Tell me a little about what food is like in your life.

What does food mean to you?

How is food similar or different for you now in comparison to when you were growing up.

Are there any food practices or foodways that you remember as important?

[Foodways = cultural, social and economic practices relating to the production and consumption of food. The term often refers to the intersection of food in culture, traditions, and history.]

Right now, or in the past year, have you experienced periods of time where you have limited or uncertain access to adequate food.

What has that experience been like?

How did you or your family cope during these times?

How do you think these periods impacted your own relationship to food?

Where and how are meals served and eaten in your home now?

How does this differ from when you were growing up?

How is it similar?

How often do you eat at restaurants, or get take-out?

What are your favorite foods (or meals) to eat?

Who is primarily responsible for preparing or providing food for your home?

[If it is participant]

What does it mean to you to be able to do this for yourself or others?

[If it is someone else]

What does it mean to you to have someone that will do this for you?

How important is it to you to have healthy meals for you or your family?

What types of foods do you consider to be “healthy” or “not healthy”?

Are there any food practices or foodways that are important to you or your family?

What do these food practices or foodways mean to you?

Tell us about a favorite memory from your life that involves food.

What makes this memory stick out to you most?

Where do you most often go to get food for your home?

How often do you go to these places?

How do you choose the places you go to? (Cost, Convenience, Quality, Food Options, etc.)

How do you choose what food to get? (Cost, Food Preferences, Convenience, Food Quality, Diet Requirements, Nutrition, health etc.)

Describe what your experiences are like at the places you go to get food.

What are the interactions like between you and other shoppers/guests?

What are the interactions like between you and the workers?

How are you treated at these places?

What are some things you like about these places?

What are some things you don’t like?

How difficult is it for you to get groceries when you need them?

What are some of the reasons why you feel like it is (or isn’t) difficult?

How important is it to you to have a choice when it comes to what type of food you can bring home?

What are some of the barriers that may keep you from being able to choose the foods you’d like to have?

Tell me about the food pantries in your community.

How accessible are the food pantries in the area?

What types of food are offered?

How do your experiences at food pantries differ from your experiences at grocery stores?

How do you feel about pantries that offer client-choice versus the more traditional pantry structure?

How successful do you feel community food pantries are at helping people get food who need it?

Why or why not?

Are there certain pantries or programs that are more used than others?

Why do think this is? (e.g. accessibility reasons, interactions at these places,

knowledge of existence, etc.)

What do you think the general public's perception is of food assistance such as food pantries or SNAP/WIC programs?

Do food assistance programs help to direct people to available resources in the community that might be helpful?

What are some ways you think food assistance could be improved in your community?

Is there anything I did not talk about that you would like to address?

IV. General background information

"May I please request some demographic information about you?"

Age (year of birth)

Sex

Race

Education level

Occupation

Marital Status

Number of people in home

Income Bracket (please select the letter of the category applying to you)

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e. \$60,000-\$75,000

f. \$75,000-\$90,000

g. \$90,000-\$100,000

h. More than \$100,000

Is there anything I did not talk about that you would like to address?

ATTACHMENT C: IRB APPROVAL PAGE

Oklahoma State University Institutional Review Board

Date: Friday, May 27, 2016
IRB Application No: AS1655
Proposal Title: Relational, responsible, and redemptive: A community engaged approach to the development of a local food resource center
Reviewed and Processed as: Exempt

Status Recommended by Reviewer(s): Approved Protocol Expires: 5/26/2019

Principal Investigator(s):

Tamara Mix	Amy Herrington
460 Murray Hall	
Stillwater, OK 74078	Stillwater, OK 74078

The IRB application referenced above has been approved. It is the judgment of the reviewers that the rights and welfare of individuals who may be asked to participate in this study will be respected, and that the research will be conducted in a manner consistent with the IRB requirements as outlined in section 45 CFR 46.

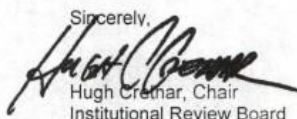
☒ The final versions of any printed recruitment, consent and assent documents bearing the IRB approval stamp are attached to this letter. These are the versions that must be used during the study.

As Principal Investigator, it is your responsibility to do the following:

1. Conduct this study exactly as it has been approved. Any modifications to the research protocol must be submitted with the appropriate signatures for IRB approval. Protocol modifications requiring approval may include changes to the title, PI advisor, funding status or sponsor, subject population composition or size, recruitment, inclusion/exclusion criteria, research site, research procedures and consent/assent process or forms
2. Submit a request for continuation if the study extends beyond the approval period. This continuation must receive IRB review and approval before the research can continue.
3. Report any adverse events to the IRB Chair promptly. Adverse events are those which are unanticipated and impact the subjects during the course of the research; and
4. Notify the IRB office in writing when your research project is complete.

Please note that approved protocols are subject to monitoring by the IRB and that the IRB office has the authority to inspect research records associated with this protocol at any time. If you have questions about the IRB procedures or need any assistance from the Board, please contact Dawnett Watkins 219 Scott Hall (phone: 405-744-5700, dawnett.watkins@okstate.edu).

Sincerely,



Hugh Crethar, Chair
Institutional Review Board

ATTACHMENT D: RECRUITMENT FLYER



FOOD RESEARCH STUDY

Seeking participants for a research project:

The purpose of this study is to explore community members' experiences with local food programs, with the goal of improving community food assistance. If you are willing to participate in research interviews, please contact me by phone or email.

Interviews can be conducted at your convenience, and participants will receive **\$20.00** as compensation.



Department of Sociology
431 Murray Hall
Oklahoma State University
Stillwater, OK 74078

ARE YOU 18 OR
OLDER & LIVE IN
PAYNE COUNTY?

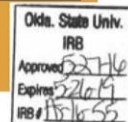
HAVE YOU EVER
VISITED A FOOD
PANTRY?

HAVE YOU EVER
APPLIED FOR A
FOOD
ASSISTANCE
PROGRAM
(SNAP/WIC)?

ARE YOU WILLING
TO PARTICIPATE
IN AN INTERVIEW?

Amy Herrington
(580)-467-2134

amy.herrington@okstate.edu



VITA

Amy Lynne Herrington

Candidate for the Degree of

Master of Science

Thesis: SEEKING FOOD JUSTICE: WHY DIGNITY MATTERS

Major Field: Sociology

Biographical:

Education:

Completed the requirements for the Master of Science in Sociology at Oklahoma State University, Stillwater, Oklahoma in December, 2017.

Completed the requirements for the Bachelor of Arts in Sociology at University of Central Oklahoma, Edmond, Oklahoma in 2015.

Experience:

Spring 2016—Fall 2017, Graduate Teaching Assistantship, Oklahoma State University.

Professional Memberships:

Fall 2016—Spring 2017, Vice President of Alpha Kappa Delta Honor Society (AKD), Oklahoma State University, Stillwater, Oklahoma.

Fall 2016—Spring 2017, Vice President of Sociology Graduate Student Association (SGSA), Oklahoma State University, Stillwater, Oklahoma.