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***“Putting Money Where My Mouth Is”:
Motivations and Experiences among Food Co-op Members****

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ABSTRACT

Of the variety of alternative grocery stores that offer natural, organic, local, and health foods in the United States, food co-ops are one of the more unique business models for alternative foods. Unlike traditional retailers, they are collectively owned and democratically operated. Prices tend to be higher in co-ops because they carry high-quality foods that are generally fresh, locally sourced, or artisanal in nature. What motivates people to join co-ops and spend more money for their membership and foods compared to other stores? This article provides ethnographic and interview data with member-owners at a relatively new co-op in South Bend, Indiana. Eighteen students enrolled in an Undergraduate Qualitative Research Methods class in the spring semester of 2017 spent two months as participant observers at a co-op and collaboratively conducted 45 semistructured interviews with its member-owners. Several noneconomic issues factored prominently in the member-owners’ decisions to invest in the co-op. The majority viewed their decision to join the co-op and shop there out of a sense of responsibility for the economy and environment in their region, and to participate in and strengthen the community.

KEY WORDS Food Co-ops; Ethical Consumerism; Responsibility; Community; Undergraduate Research

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This study was conducted in an undergraduate Qualitative Research Methods course at Indiana University South Bend. Eighteen students assisted in collecting data by conducting ethnographic observations and semistructured interviews during the course semester. I thank the following students, who served as coinvestigators in this study: Valeria Chamorro, Carrissa Cross, John DeVreese, Kimberly Haining, Emily Hicks, Madison Hofferth, Savannah Hope, ShaLynn Jones, Colleen Laderer, Briannah McCall, Naomi Presley-Blackman, Jerrod Reed, Kristy Schill, Marissa Tilden, Peter Vukovits, Carissa White, Tonja Winfield, and Cassie Young. I also thank Greg Koehler and Myles Robertson for their assistance in coordinating this project.

In our global food landscape dominated by corporate agribusiness giants, the food cooperatives that dot towns and cities across the United States provide opportunities for regional farmers and the public to reclaim a portion of ownership and control over the food that is grown and distributed in communities. Although the cooperative model has existed for well over a century, co-ops continue to function as decentralized organizations at local levels and serve the interests of community members who seek alternative governance and countercultural influence over foodways (Cox 1994). Unlike most grocery stores and food markets, co-ops are managed and operated through democratic ownership among employees and individuals in their communities (Deller et al. 2009; Knupfer 2013; Restakis 2010). They are organizations that are collectively owned by members of the community who buy shares, all earning equal votes in decisions about the stores' operations. Profits are distributed back into the business and sometimes as dividends to members. Furthermore, co-ops are usually "alternative economic spaces" organized around a set of political ideas about markets and moral concerns with how markets should operate (Zitcer 2017:182). More narrowly, food co-ops are often organized around goals related to healthy and safe foods (such as organic foods, fresh fruits and vegetables, and non-GMO produce), transparency (particularly regarding information of origin and growing methods), consumer education, community strength, and social and economic justice (fair pay for employees and local farmers) (Knupfer 2013; Zitcer 2014; Zitcer 2017). Co-ops typically attempt to meet these goals today by offering natural foods and establishing economic connections with local farms and businesses in ways that equitably disperse economic rewards.

Although the overall market for food co-ops is relatively small compared to sales in conventional grocery stores and supermarkets, new food co-ops continue to emerge. People are drawn to membership and shared ownership in co-ops for many reasons. In general, members of co-ops want access to natural and organic foods. Food available in co-ops is often procured fresh from small-scale local farms, regional artisanal bakeries, and health-conscious producers who specialize in natural alternatives and quality foods (Knupfer 2013). The definition of what constitutes local is debatable, but food is generally understood to be local if it has been grown approximately 60–100 miles from point of purchase. Artisanal foods are grown or produced using more traditional methods, with a focus on smaller quantities of production, unique tastes and characteristics, and personal handcrafted touches. Co-op members also tend to be environmentally conscientious and to make efforts to support their local economies (Spaniolo and Howard 2011).

Foods embodying each of these characteristics can easily be purchased from a growing number of supermarkets and grocery stores, and an expanding number of farmers markets in America's current food economy, however. For example, more than 6,000 community-supported agriculture (CSA) programs and 8,000 farmers markets currently operate across the United States (McFadden 2012; USDA Economic Research Service 2017). Today, co-ops also face tough competition in the natural foods market as organic options and health-food stores proliferate (Haedicke 2014). Furthermore, it is likely that access to foods like this will become easier and more widespread after Amazon's purchase of Whole Foods in August of 2017 (Wingfield 2017).

Despite the overlap in food types and selection between co-ops, farmers markets, CSAs and health food stores, food co-ops differ mainly in that they are owned by members who have direct votes in sourcing and store inventory. This distinction provides members with a degree of collective agency and mobilization that is unavailable from other alternative food markets. Additionally, as competition in food markets expands and grocery stores implement efficiencies, many co-ops reject the pressure to operate on larger economies of scale or to compromise their “mission-driven” business practices (Haedicke 2012). This affords co-ops more freedom from larger enterprises and allows them to uphold noneconomic goals in their organizational function, but it also means that prices in co-ops tend to be higher for many food items compared to those in larger supermarkets, and co-op locations remain unequally distributed across the landscape. Moreover, consumers in America find the convenience of one-stop shopping at larger supermarkets appealing, especially when pressed for time and money when balancing jobs and families. For some families, making a separate trip to a co-op to obtain select goods could be difficult to fit in with their full schedules and budgets. The extensive amount of time and work required to plan for meals, purchase groceries, and prepare foods for a family—responsibilities shouldered largely by women—means that many shoppers are likely reticent to incorporate additional tasks into their established food-buying habits and busy routines (DeVault 1991:59–70).

Even with these challenges, food co-ops are expanding, with new start-ups every year. Today, there are at least 10 distinct co-op grocery stores in Indiana, and more than 300 in the United States, with a growing market of more than \$2 billion in annual sales revenue (Co-op Directory Service 2013; Deller et al. 2009:19–22). People continue to join these alternative organizations as a variety of natural, health, and organic food markets multiply across the economy. From a sociological perspective, an important consideration is which additional social and cultural qualities co-ops provide that motivate people to join. Part of the allure of co-ops for many members is that co-ops often operate in niche spaces of the food market. They provide unique environments and specialty food items, serve as community spaces in which to share ideas and visions, and often incorporate education to the public about agriculture, food, and cooking. According to Haedicke (2014), members join this type of alternative business platform because “co-ops strive to promote a democratic, environmentally sustainable, and socially just food system” in ways that truly counter the industrial food system (p. 36). Haedicke continues, “Co-op members and staff devise strategies to challenge consumerist individualism and engage their customers in critical discussions about the structure of the contemporary food industry” (pp. 36–37). In this regard, many members see ownership in and shopping at co-ops as a form of economic activism and political resistance; therefore, on a social level, an additional key concern that drives many people to invest and participate in the viability of the cooperative model is a desire to forge and reestablish community around a sense of local identity and values in neighborhoods and cities that have been destabilized by economic forces at play for decades.

This paper analyzes a small and relatively new food co-op called Riverfront¹ in South Bend, Indiana, as a case study of the unique qualities that entice individuals to become member-owners. As both alternative foods and ethical consumption continue to

establish their presence in the economy, we ask the following questions about the role that co-ops play in these changes in the worlds of food production and consumption: Why do member-owners join a co-op and shop there when they can get similar foods elsewhere that are less expensive? What does a co-op provide its members that they cannot acquire from other food markets or sources?

Specifically, we seek to understand why members and customers choose to shop at the co-op despite these costs.

DESCRIPTION OF RIVERFRONT CO-OP

The Riverfront co-op is the first and only in its city. It is housed in a relatively small space of approximately 1000 square feet but includes a café, grocery section, and outdoor farmers market. The co-op contains a fresh produce section, refrigerated and frozen goods, bulk items, an assortment of packaged foods, a coffee and hot salad bar, and kombucha on tap. Riverfront opened its doors in 2014 and currently has more than 1,000 member-owners, of whom at least 500 are active shoppers. Riverfront is smaller than most food co-ops in the United States, which have an average 6,400 members per co-op store (National Cooperative Grocers Association 2012). Despite its smaller size, Riverfront operates using a standard cooperative model. One-time equity shares of \$200 are available for purchase to individuals and families in the public. Once a person or family becomes a member-owner of the co-op, the member is entitled to a 10 percent grocery discount once per month, price specials, a patronage refund if the store makes a profit, and a vote at the annual meeting. There are no defined responsibilities attached to member-ownership other than the initial capital investment and a voice in the co-op's policies and inventory. Because there are no responsibilities attached to membership, only 20–30 attend the annual meeting to vote. This co-op is also open and welcoming to people who are not member-owners, however. Anyone can shop, eat, and attend the farmers market at Riverfront.

The co-op is located in the downtown region of South Bend, a city of a little more than 100,000 people. It is the only grocery store located in this section of the city and therefore provides a unique and convenient opportunity for people in the city to buy a variety of foods. The location and open-access nature of the co-op align with its mission to provide a space for community gathering and access to healthy foods in the downtown region. Riverfront co-op promises to uphold environmentally friendly practices, to support the local economy by sourcing small businesses and family farms, and to develop relationships with Fair Trade producers. Like other co-ops, Riverfront encourages its member-owners to become educated about the structural problems in today's industrial food systems as well as to become consumer activists for food justice and community revitalization (Knupfer 2013).

METHODS

The data collection for this study was conducted through a Qualitative Research Methods course at Indiana University South Bend with undergraduate students during the spring

semester of 2017. Eighteen students were enrolled in the course, and each spent two months as coinvestigators making ethnographic observations at Riverfront co-op and conducting semistructured interviews with a sample of its member-owners. We wanted to know why people joined, what their experiences were with the co-op, and what distinguished it from the new health and natural foods stores that had opened nearby. This project was also an opportunity for student investigators to learn how to collect and analyze qualitative data. Each investigator visited the co-op on three separate occasions for 90 minutes and observed shoppers in the grocery and café. The co-op is open daily and coinvestigators found different times in the morning and afternoon throughout each day of the week to make observations. Coinvestigators would make jottings of their observations and interactions and developed a full set of fieldnotes after each visit (Emerson et al. 1995). The co-investigative students spent approximately a combined 75 hours in the store making ethnographic observations and writing fieldnotes. The purpose of these fieldnotes was to find a unifying set of patterns and social activities and advance further inquiry around new questions. Therefore, the fieldnotes were collaboratively used to create an interview guide with focused open-ended questions with primary individuals in this social setting. After we created the interview guide, coinvestigator conducted three separate semistructured interviews with a total of 45 member-owners of the Riverfront co-op. Our interviewees were predominately white and self-identified as middle-class, and most had college degrees. Thirty-two (32) of these members were women, and 12 were men. We contacted all member-owners by email and invited them to participate in the study. In an effort to recruit people to interview, we also placed a flyer and sign-up sheet with information about the study in the co-op for members to read when they visited the store. The length of interviews varied, but they averaged about 25 minutes. Some were as short as 15 minutes, whereas others lasted 45 minutes to an hour. Each coinvestigator transcribed the interviews he or she conducted.

This research project was exploratory and was navigated without a hypothesis. We approached the ethnographic data collected in this case study with grounded theory methodology, and the interview transcriptions with qualitative content analysis (Charmaz 2006; Warren and Karner 2009). During the initial stage, we amassed field notes from all coinvestigators and searched for emergent patterns as we simultaneously collected and analyzed our data. As we read through the collection of field notes, we constructed analytic codes through iterative coding procedures. After assessing emerging themes in field notes, coinvestigators generated an interview schedule with questions designed around initial observations. In the second stage, we conducted semistructured interviews until all the key issues we could uncover were saturated (Berg and Lune 2012; Guest, Bunce, and Johnson 2006).

We transcribed all the interviews and then applied qualitative content analysis to our total body of transcripts in two additional phases. First, we reviewed and compared all transcript data with an open-coding process. Essentially, we assigned every line or paragraph of each transcript a definition or label for its main attributes. This allowed us to capture prominent issues and experiences shared across all interviews and to develop a coding rubric to identify established patterns. With this coding rubric, we then fine-coded the transcript data once more and isolated prominent concepts regarding member-owner

motivations and experiences. In this second phase, we sifted through the data and identified transcript text with codes, then sorted the coded text into separate files. The purpose of this method is to develop inferences of shared attributes across all the texts in our interview sample.

In our study of Riverfront, we sought to understand who the co-op primarily served, why people became members, what types of items in the store were most enticing to members, and what the shared experiences of membership were. Our research team collectively found key concepts in the transcripts of 45 semistructured interviews with the member-owners who were willing to meet individually with us. These findings were emergent and embedded within larger themes related to ethics and responsibility in consumer choices, desire for noneconomic benefits such as community building and interpersonal bonds in market settings, and an awareness and willingness to pay additional costs that are typically externalized in traditional or corporate food markets.

FINDINGS

Nearly all the members we spoke to in our study claimed that the quality of the food and the local or specialty items in the store were important features of the co-op². At the same time, the clear majority also shared a deeper set of beliefs and values that motivated them to become members and shop at the co-op. After interacting with shoppers conducting our interviews, we would generally describe the population of Riverfront co-op member-owners as ethical food consumers (Carrier and Luetchford 2012; Hinrichs and Lyson 2009; Williams-Forson and Counihan 2011). These are consumers who are conscious about how food practices interact with and affect people along multiple social dimensions. Confronted with food choices and markets that many felt were harmful to the local economy, the environment, and their personal health, members described a sense of duty to support the co-op once the opportunity had presented itself. The mind-set that most of the members shared with one another and during our interviews was of taking responsibility for establishing and funding a more sustainable food system in their city. Members made it clear that they “owe something to their community” and wanted to demonstrate their commitments to this process of supporting and protecting the alternative food model that Riverfront co-op embodied.

After coding all our transcript data, we also found that members in our study greatly valued the community connections and social atmosphere that were central to this co-op. Beyond its function as a grocery store, Riverfront served as a centrally located meeting place for conversation and as an educational setting where people could learn about the local food system and cultural events. It is in this capacity as a hub for social engagement that the co-op uniquely provided special experiences for its members and shoppers in ways that other grocery stores did not. In our findings, we describe two key themes that emerged in our analysis for why people join and financially support the co-op: (1) the motivations to support local farmers and protect their community against the often hidden and harmful industrial food system, and (2) the experience of community connections and interpersonal bonds that form in this setting.

Motivations: Responsibility to Protect and Support the Local Food System

“Put Money Where My Mouth Is”. The primary way that Riverfront co-op members in our study claimed and acted upon a sense of responsibility was in their reported use of money when making consumer choices. On several occasions, our interviewees explained that their memberships were a direct way to “put money where [their] mouth is” and tangibly act on their values. Five (5) of the 45 member-owners we interviewed used this specific refrain when asked why they initially decided to become co-owners of the co-op. An office manager in his 50s put it this way:

I decided I better put my money where my mouth is and join. I just know that it helps them financially and I felt like I wanted to become part of something. I am a vegan and believe in wholesome food and sustainability and supporting my local people. It is a part of the community coming together to support one another.

A registered nurse in her early 30s correspondingly stated the following:

I wanted to help them get their start because I thought what they were doing was really neat and good for the community. And I just wanted to be part of it because I always talk about what we need to change. Instead of just talking about it, here I can put my money in that direction. I’m part of a community that not only cares about their food but about their neighborhood and their environment in general. And I know my money is supporting something really positive.

Here, these members reflected on their use of money to buy into and prop up this cooperative grocery store because it provided a place for good food and people to come together. It was also a decision to act financially to promote a business they felt was of value to the community. A 28-year-old member used similar terms when explaining his choice to be part of the co-op:

I guess I like putting my money where my mouth is. A big reason why I care about the co-op is because I feel like it’s more about the social aspect of things and a little bit heavier on the side of helping. The co-op interacts between a lot of small producers in this area. Riverfront right now is kind of seen as a business that supports other small businesses, and those small businesses are producers within the area. So that’s the big draw for me is that in some small way I get to support financially what I want to see more of in our community.

For the members quoted above, their responsibility amounted to something bigger than themselves; it was an opportunity to inject money into an emerging network in the community. These members' motivations also reflect a desire to protect and support local control over the food system that is dominated by industrial agribusiness. The co-op builds direct relationships with nearby small family farms and businesses that are much more community-oriented than large food corporations. Their money therefore helps redirect control and influence away from corporations in ways that more immediately help families and farmers in the surrounding region.

This line of thinking was shared with a retired lab technician in her late 60s who had been a member for more than two years. She described the impact she could make with her food purchases:

My husband and I have belonged to various food co-ops throughout the years. And I just like the idea of the co-op, in the sense that you know the members are kind of, well, they have some say in how it is run and the philosophy. Co-ops are fun because you get to know the people. It is not just like you go in and buy something and give your money. You have a relationship with the other people in the co-op. I get to put my money where my mouth is. Maybe it is partly wishful thinking on my part, but it is sort of a little tiny bit of not buying into the corporate culture.

Similarly, John, an engineer we interviewed, explained that he preferred to shop at Riverfront even if it meant spending more on comparable foods that he could find at a corporate location. Even though other health-food stores such as Whole Foods are located in this city, his reasoning for shopping at the co-op instead was that it promoted self-sufficiency and would be of greater benefit to the independence of the local economy:

Riverfront co-op is pretty similar to Whole Foods in terms of what it carries. I mean, Whole Foods carries a ton more, but I would rather shop here because it is local. I have nothing against Whole Foods, but big corporations are not exactly in tune with this country right now. I like the idea of the smaller, co-op, member-owned, local, regional, organic experience. So, yeah, I would rather support this organization than anyone who has a similar lineup. Sometimes Whole Foods may be a little cheaper, but to the extent that I am able to afford it without it being way out of line again I would rather support this place. I like the idea of becoming more dependent on ourselves and independent from the big corporations.

Using money this way denies corporations profits and supports regional agricultural autonomy. It also helps to build interpersonal connections and strengthen relationships with other people who utilize the co-op. People meet each other while shopping or at various market events hosted at Riverfront. For example, during our observations in the store, we witnessed constant chatting in the aisles and conversations among customers in the café section adjacent to the register. Members and shoppers utilized the space to meet over coffee with friends, share a quick meal and talk about work and family, or work together on class and business projects. Parents with small children would meet at the co-op to get out of the house and to shop for groceries and get snacks. These connections are often experienced as more impactful and meaningful to members because they help to forge associations around a common alternative goal. Investing money into the co-op and then getting to meet and form relationships with the people who are being supported with that money can be a very positive social feature of co-op membership.

Supporting the Alternative Food Movement, Local Farmers, and Sustainability. A similar theme that surfaced in conversations with Riverfront co-op members was that they wanted to jump on opportunities to support and help an alternative food model in their city. Many described the significance of coming together to provide unified support for a new co-op and for farmers in the region in moral terms to ensure economic support and social connectivity.

As Jane, a female member who works as a faculty member at a nearby university, stated:

It's important to invest in our community and we like to support that. We put our money where our hearts are. I love going in on market nights and meeting the farmers, which is huge. Getting to know farmers as real people and not just “farmers and hicks or rednecks” or whatever people think of them; they are real people and very intelligent and very skilled at what they do. Also, the small signs that say how much of the money actually goes to the farmers every month makes me feel really good.

Here, Jane illustrates the unique contributions and roles that farmers bring to the co-op. Unlike most grocery stores, co-ops can forge relatively direct and interpersonal relationships with the farmers who supply food to their stores. Several farmers and suppliers visited Riverfront and participated in weekly events that served as hybrid farmers markets and community events. Members of the co-op could meet and talk with farmers and learn a little about their experiences and farming operations. Most of the foods in the store were also labeled with information regarding their farm origins, so it was relatively easy for a shopper to get a sense of where everything came from; therefore, both in interaction and through information provided in the store, many members reported that their experience with the co-op was enhanced by the sense that their

financial commitments to the store connected and extended into their desire to know more about, integrate into, and support their community.

Paul, an IT director in his early 60s, also saw his membership as an opportunity to support the local economy and farmers, and to indirectly build interpersonal connections with farmers. Although there were other perks associated with becoming a co-op member, Paul focused on the hope that his financial contribution could help safeguard the store's long-term viability:

There are very small discounts, but the discount is the smallest reason that I continue to support it. I like to be a member of the community and to sustain the market. I like to support the local businesses and the natural food providers as well as meet the vendors. They sometimes have a farmers market once a week where you can meet and talk with the vendors about their products and the way they make or produce their goods. It's unique in our downtown, and it gives residents a stake in the food market since it is a co-op. So it's giving the community a chance to be part of a local change as well as a larger community change.

Like others in our interview sample, Paul was suggesting that being a customer at Riverfront involved much more than the typical grocery-shopping routine. Because members like Paul and Jane viewed their membership fee and monetary support for the co-op as a small part of a larger investment into community empowerment and a transformation of the food system, the feelings of commitment that the above members described is unlikely to be transferred to other grocery stores in the surrounding area. Whereas most food purchases at supermarkets are utilitarian in nature, Paul viewed his investment as a member at Riverfront, as well as the sustained relationships he could create with vendors at the co-op, as part of a larger goal of helping the city to transform and thrive in positive dynamic ways.

Paul believed that supporting a co-op provided broader benefits than just strengthening community cohesion. Further into our interview, he also envisioned his support as extending into preventing agricultural practices that are harmful for the environment. His concerns with food justice and sustainability also influenced his wish to support Riverfront because the store transparently demonstrated actions it had taken to reduce environmental damage associated with industrial agriculture:

The manure lagoons and the spillages and the environmental damage, it really bothered me. I thought, I'm just not going to support that, you know. So, when I met a farmer at Riverfront, they have pictures of their pigs and how they take care of them and what they do to

manage, you know, all the manure and stuff. It is so much more sustainable. I thought, "I want to support that." One thing I've become aware of is that a lot of people who come here have very deep engagement on a personal level because they believe in food justice or sustainability, you know, any number of things. The co-op allows them to abide by these personal beliefs.

Other members viewed their support of this co-op in similar terms, in which Riverfront became a tangible way to pursue sustainability and environmental causes through the food economy. Ann is a paralegal and a self-described baby boomer who is deeply concerned about both local and global environmental impacts of agriculture. She met with us one afternoon to discuss her involvement with Riverfront and shared parallel thoughts about the desire to invest and be directly engaged in an organization that is working against many harmful trends:

I absolutely appreciate and support the co-op idea and ideology, but maybe even more important to me is the notion of regional agricultural. And I have been very involved in the Sierra Club and the Organic Consumers Association. It is very clear that with global warming and things like that affecting our planet, that shipping fruit from California is not sustainable. I really want to do whatever I can to support and encourage regional agriculture. And that is basically voting with your dollars, you know not just talking about it, or marching in a protest, but actually putting your money in it. So that's the biggest thing. I buy almost all my food from here or the farmer's market. I only eat organic to the extent that I can do that.

It was not unique for Riverfront members to express a desire to financially support the co-op as a business. What Ann and many others communicated with us as they reflected upon the meaning of their membership with the co-op is that they have made a priority to connect food purchases and eating to a larger set of concerns related to the environments and social fabrics of the places they live. In fact, this mind-set was nested within a larger perspective shared by many member-owners that supporting the co-op and "voting with your food dollars" or "putting your money where your mouth is" naturally entailed spending more money compared to other locations. The sense of responsibility in supporting the co-op was so strong for many members that one person named Erika even told us that she makes an extra effort to shop at Riverfront and feels guilty spending money for foods at other stores. "That level of commitment here is personal," she exclaimed. "I mean I would just feel terrible if another member saw me shopping at Meijer [a large Midwestern chain]."

Experiences: Community and Social Atmosphere

Forging Connections with Like-Minded People. According to 23 of the 45 members we interviewed, the primary quality distinguishing Riverfront from other grocery stores in the region was its emphasis on community and on strengthening interpersonal bonds through the food economy. Some members spoke about Riverfront as an ideal place to find new acquaintances and forge connections. One member told us, “We have a lot of new residents, and this co-op gives them the opportunity to meet new people.” For people interested in a variety of alternative economic and agricultural organizations in society, a place like Riverfront served as a hub where like-minded people could come together even if they did not know one another. This was very important for members when they realized that there was unmet shared demand in their community for local and alternative foods from independent sources. Others described Riverfront as an essential location for mobilizing and strengthening a new consumer voice. For example, Catherine, a professor at a nearby public university, described Riverfront as a “secular church” that “provides community” around gardening and food security.

Members found these connections with others who supported and shopped at the co-op to be enriching and empowering. Building something new with other people who share similar concerns can be a rewarding experience. When it comes to food and support for local agriculture, our interviewees reiterated the importance of being part of an organized and committed business like Riverfront. Mary, a senior citizen who had lived in town for a long time, told us about her work with the city and the need to be proactive in making positive changes with other people of the same mind-set in the community:

I believe in eating in a healthy way that tries to eliminate harmful substances. I like having free-range and grass-fed foods and just the whole concept of wellness and supporting small businesses in a way. And I believe in citizen participation and citizen responsibility and any initiative that incorporates that. So, this co-op really brings healthy and well-thinking people together. The people are wonderful. They are like-minded people and are often young. I assume that you're a certain type of person if you work here. That you have a basic understanding and appreciation and commitment to equity and social justices.

According to Mary, the push for social justice is deeply connected to the food system and the co-op is a natural place where a community can mobilize to work toward effective changes.

This outlook was largely shared with other members and shoppers at Riverfront, which served as a tacit anchor in the region for progressive goals. People in the city who held the same opinions regarding community problems and solutions in America found solidarity in this atypical grocery store.

Another female, named Debbie, who was a case manager at a hospital, shared similar thoughts about the value of being part of an organization with people who share interests and work toward a common cause:

I feel that community is very important to me and my family. I like being surrounded by people who feel the same way I do about food. I feel it is important to be a sustaining member. We like to walk to most places, and Riverfront supports sustainable farming. We like to know the farmers and appreciate having a connection to them. I feel it is important to help our farmers and have a relationship with them.

Social Interaction. The ambiance at the co-op is also vibrant with music and conversation, and the layout is designed that makes it difficult to avoid social interaction. People visit with one another and mingle before and after purchasing items or enjoying lunch. “Sometimes I’ll come to shop and not leave for an hour because I’m chitchatting with people,” one member told us. “I just love coming here and meeting people.” On more than one occasion, interviewees expressed that Riverfront felt like an extension of their families. An older man described this as a feeling of deeper interpersonal connection to people at the co-op: “It’s great to come in here and have people walk up to me and say, ‘I think I went to school with your kid.’ At other stores they’re just anonymous shoppers. That’s the difference.” A different member, who was a recent college graduate, stated, “Sometimes I joke that I kind of live at Riverfront because I’m there so often. But it really does feel like coming to family because everybody is so incredibly friendly and helpful.”

During our observations, we noted that many members shopped as families with their children at Riverfront and enjoyed bumping into other families. When we spoke to Beth, a parent in her mid-40s who does economic-development work in the city, she described a warm relationship, with Riverfront as a comfortable place for her to visit with her children:

In my opinion what they do well is create a community. It’s a hub for people to meet, have conversations and interactions with people you know. It enriches your life. It is also a place where I feel comfortable for my children to go. As a parent, I can feel comfortable with sending my children in for errands. I don’t always have to be with them. I can send them in with a list and some money to go shop. I feel like it is safe and it is nice to let them grow. The other thing that it does is that it provides a market for the local food economy. Overall, my general experience is excellent and I always look forward to going there. I always run into people that I know. There’s a personal connection with the workers.

Nearly every member of our interview sample described Riverfront as a comfortable, rewarding, and enriching environment that was ideal for families and community involvement. In this way, the co-op resembled a “third place” that functions as an extension beyond home and work where people could come together to enjoy a place and company in a relaxing and informal setting but also contribute to the vitality of the community (Oldenburg 1999).

A key reason that the social and community aspects of the co-op are important to most members is reflected largely in the fact that most retail stores are now organized by large centralized corporate chains disconnected from the ebb and flow of local settings. A sense of disconnection, anonymity, and isolation is common within many commercial spaces in America today, and co-ops offer an inverse logic to this development. This sentiment was shared by a member named Eileen, who is retired and had been with Riverfront from the beginning, when she explained how much she valued the personal connection that she and her husband had with the co-op:

Our membership is important to us and we like coming here frequently. They even know us by name! When we come in they're very friendly with us, the people that work here, and it doesn't feel rehearsed. They even remember our membership ID number, because we come here so much.

Being recognized and being on a first-name basis is likely to enhance a person's sense of purpose and commitment to the Riverfront. It demonstrates that the person is valued by the co-op and is considered an integral part of the co-op's viability. It also helps change the mentality of the members about what it means to support the store and shop there.

Unlike in other grocery stores, a key mission of Riverfront is to build community and strengthen collective bonds. In turn, many members feel that the co-op is an extension of their identity and place in the surrounding community. Instead of just shopping at a store that belongs to someone else, members feel a strong link and sense of ownership with Riverfront. Diane, who had lived in South Bend for more than 50 years, explained it this way:

I feel comfortable shopping here. Also, I don't consider the co-op “they” but think of it as “we.” Whenever I come in I ask, if I want to find a product, I say, “Do ‘we’ have ... “ whatever we have today instead of “do you have” because I feel like I'm a member and I was instrumental in getting the store open, so I'm very much a part of it so it's not a “we” and “them” kind of thing. What I like is that sense of community.

CONCLUSION

As neighborhoods and cities around the country see citizens becoming active in revitalization efforts, food co-ops continue to serve as a demonstration and symbol of

mobilized communities interjecting ideas of independence, autonomy, and control in the economic and cultural landscape. They are also often hubs for organic and high-quality foods and ingredients, fresh local produce, and specialty items from artisan purveyors. The Riverfront co-op was a unique food purveyor in its city, with a broad variety of local, organic, health, and natural options. Riverfront's goals reflected an interest in environmental stewardship, revitalization of the city economy and culture, and bolstering independent growth beyond the dictates of corporate agribusiness.

As a cooperatively owned business, however, Riverfront also sought to be a different type of place where people could shop, meet, and organize. Members were attracted to the co-op for additional reasons unrelated to food, environmental, or economic issues. In fact, more than half of our interviewees told us that one of the most important reasons they joined was to be part of the social fabric woven into the co-op. The social atmosphere in the co-op was one of the most valuable experiences that members reported in their relationship with and dedication to Riverfront: People could share conversations while shopping, and parents with small children could meet and socialize; occasionally the co-op organized events with music, food trucks, farmers markets, and craft beer from local breweries. This co-op established a community space with a sense of collective ownership that typically does not exist at other grocery stores.

Broadly speaking, Riverfront has become a center for community and education for the alternative food economy and progressive social issues in the city. Like other cooperatively owned grocery stores, it has the capacity to respond flexibly to the concerns and desires of the local farmers and consumers it serves. Our findings suggest that member-owners of co-op food stores are willing to pay a premium for this alternative arrangement for a variety of environmental, economic, and social reasons. The self-reported benefits, both direct and indirect, that they derive from a local co-op reflect a strong desire to strengthen local food networks, prevent environmental damage associated with industrial agriculture, and establish stronger interpersonal bonds with other people in their community who are interested in transforming the structures of the economy. The members we interviewed in this study believed the co-op was the most effective way they could secure these benefits, primarily because of the unconventional way the co-op established alternative orientations toward community, the food economy, and business ownership.

In the contemporary food economy dominated by corporations, co-ops continue to be an organizational method for communities to reclaim ownership of and protect regional food systems. As communities confront a growing set of broad and deep structural problems in society— from community fragmentation and political polarization to environmental degradation and climate change—concerned individuals want to enter new roles as consumers and citizens. Many want to take on new responsibilities and make conscientious adjustments in their living as a way of practicing ethical consumerism (Barnett et al. 2011; Lewis and Potter 2011). By challenging the status quo of the agricultural system, the co-op members we interacted with described a moral duty to be active and engaged with the political economy of food. Acting locally and spending a premium on foods at a co-op served as a direct and effective way to make a difference in the immediate world they inhabited.

This study was limited in time and in its ability to access a broader range of member-owners of the co-op. Because it was conducted in the duration of a one-semester class, we were unable to extend our data collection over a longer time and to gather more insights as the seasons changed. Although we were able to conduct a substantial number of semistructured interviews, we would have liked to have contacted a larger number of member-owners. A little more than 10 percent of the active member-owner population responded to our emails or signed up to schedule interviews. We asked for information regarding age, income, and occupation, but many of our respondents did not want to reveal this information. Furthermore, we did not have access to the demographic composition of the member-owner registry for this co-op. With our relatively small sample size and limited demographic data, we are therefore unable to state how representative our interview sample is of the total member-owner population.

Our respondents appear to have been very active members and to hold many shared interests with the mission of food co-ops, but with more time, we would have sampled a larger number to identify a broader set of patterns among member interests or experiences. Although we found key themes to become saturated with our sample, it is always possible that members who did not respond or who were less active in the co-op may have held different opinions that are worth investigating.

Additional research into food co-ops in America is warranted. As co-ops continue to grow, it is important to assess the extent to which the co-op model can substantially alter the food system. Future studies should analyze who benefits most from co-ops, and which consumer groups are not helped by or are uninterested in co-ops.

What do co-ops need to accomplish to be successful and to attract new members in the future? How will they compete with new food giants like Amazon, which purchased Whole Foods and promised to reduce prices substantially by transforming the financial model of a grocery store into that of a tech start-up? Questions such as these will need to be addressed so food co-ops can move forward to foster social change and capture a larger segment of the market without undermining their values and goals.

ENDNOTES

1. This is a pseudonym.
2. We use pseudonyms for all respondents. All subjects involved in the study were promised confidentiality and anonymity to the greatest extent possible. Field-note data was secured in a locked file in the office of the primary investigator, and all audio recordings of interviews were destroyed after transcription. We include age, gender, and occupation of respondents only if they volunteered this information.

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