

Connected Communities

Connecting communities through food

The development of community supported agriculture in the UK

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Background

Executive Summary

There is a convergence of the cultural and material worlds occurring in farming, driven by communities making connections between the production and consumption of food.

This new civic agriculture is experienced in multiple ways, from small groups of allotment holders, to large groups owning substantial farming businesses and land. Although characterised as a consumerist response to industrial farming and mass marketing, this research suggests the emergence of a 'new productivist' agenda in which diverse communities take bodily, commercial and political control over the food that they consume. Through exploring the role that visual art and culture plays in the formation and expression of individual and community identity, the research found that the convergence between the cultural and material is driven by transition in the ways in which people practice development of the self in the context of community. This is not just about food security, but also about expressing commitment to sustainable everyday life practices, informed by a range of aspirations including: a desire to support particular diets through locally-sourced foods; an ambition to challenge conventional food growing stereotypes relating to (dis)ability, gender and sexual orientation; and a wish to make an explicit commitment to personal, family and community health.

Researchers and Project Partners

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Key words

Allotments
Community development
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Civic agriculture
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Participatory research

Connecting communities through food

Research Context and Questions

There has been much recent academic and practitioner interest in community food growing initiatives (see Cox, et al, 2008; Petherick, 2010; McKay, 2011; Plunkett Foundation n.d). This is part of a cultural turn in farming and food production, away from intensive and industrialised farming and towards groups of people working together in allotments, city farms and substantial farming enterprises. At the core of this is a new form of social enterprise known as Community Supported Agriculture (CSA), which was pioneered in Germany, the USA and Japan, but which has now spread across the globe (Groh and MacFadden, 1990; Henderson and Van En, 2007; Ravenscroft and Taylor, 2009). The multiple relationships between farmers, communities and land that characterise CSA suggest that it can inform us about contemporary forms of connected communities, in terms of connections to the domestic past, connections to particular social, economic, political and environmental ideals, and connections to contemporary health and well-being agendas. Yet the histories of most CSAs and other community food groups are predominantly oral, and few attempts have been made to document or analyse their development, structure or operation, let alone the messages that they have for understanding connected communities. Despite some work by the Soil Association, as part of the 'Making Local Food Work' project, there remains an urgent need to conduct a more extensive, historically rooted, ethnographic study of community food groups, in order to ensure that there is a documentary record of their existence, and to consider what these histories can tell us about the wider framing of questions

about contemporary communities and their connectedness.

Research aims and objectives

The principal aim of this research was to establish what is known about CSA and community food groups in the UK, and to identify what this tells us about community connectedness. The project also investigated the role played by visual culture in mediating and representing understandings of community food growing activity in different contexts, allied to considering the need for, and most effective way of establishing, an archival collection and/or resource centre for CSA, capable of addressing academic and community research requirements. Addressing these aims involved bringing together researchers with different disciplinary and inter-disciplinary approaches to community research, in order to consider how best to work with CSA and food communities to develop a robust approach to understanding their connectedness and recording and interpreting their histories and development.

Methodology

A multi-method approach was used, to incorporate both conventional researcher-led archival and ethnographic data collection alongside new approaches to reflexive community-driven research. The methods comprised:

1. An archival study of CSAs and community food groups in the UK, to assess the significance of these information sources to studying and understanding contemporary connected communities;

2. A literature study of academic research on contemporary CSAs and their antecedents, seeking to locate their development within a broader context of self-help movements, friendly societies and creative gift economy;
 3. Three community-designed and led artistic interventions through which those involved could reflect on what it is to be part of a community connected through food; and
 4. A number of participatory events for researchers and communities, sharing both the research methods and the findings from the activities of the three partner projects, to develop key messages about the connections experienced within CSAs and community food groups, and to work collaboratively to develop a proposal for follow-on research.
- a community supported farm (<http://vimeo.com/28277968>). TPH also started an archive of materials relating to their history, from which they produced story boards that have been displayed at events in East Sussex and Manchester. Progress on the project has been reported in the farms' newsletter; see www.tablehurstandplawhatch.co.uk/Newsletters.html
 - Universities of Brighton, Manchester and Durham: two workshop presentations (Moore, 2011a, 2012); one conference presentation (Ravenscroft, 2011); two research reports (Moore, 2011b; Ravenscroft, et al, 2010) three draft academic papers (Ravenscroft, et al, 2012a, 2012b; Welch, et al, 2012), and one research protocol (Moore, 2012) addressing the social history of community food groups; the representation of food growing activity in popular and visual culture; the motivations for people connecting through food; and protocols for undertaking community-engaged research.

Outputs

- Spitalfields City Farm (SCF): an interactive 'talking quilt' which enabled the farm community to create a material 'document' that could contribute to an oral history project with the Federation of City Farms. The Connected Communities research thus provided a context to the content of the quilt, both visually and aurally.
- Likt Young Women's Health Project (Likt): two films produced by the young women documenting their work at the allotment and the ways in which they engaged with the space and the food growing: www.likt.org.uk/activities/allotment/
- Tablehurst and Plaw Hatch Community Farms (TPH): a professionally produced film was made of the farm open day, 19th June 2011. It features the farm staff and volunteers explaining what it is to be part of

Findings

Reconstructing community: from neoclassicism to gift exchange

Food communities have been characterised in the literature as a largely middle class consumerist response to industrial farming and mass marketing. This research suggests that an alternative, 'new productivist' agenda is emerging in which socially diverse communities take bodily as well as commercial and political control over the food that they consume. The research has found that this cultural turn from consumption to production is driven by changes in the ways in which people practice

development of the self in the context of community. This is not just about food security, but also about expressing commitment to sustainable everyday life practices, informed by a range of aspirations including: a desire to support particular diets through locally-sourced foods; an ambition to challenge conventional food growing stereotypes relating to (dis)ability, gender and sexual orientation; and a wish to make an explicit commitment to personal, family and community education and health through establishing stronger connections with local outdoor environments. This suggests that food communities of the type studied in this research may be in the vanguard of a new approach to connectedness where the narrow constraints of individualised neoclassicism are replaced by the interconnectedness of multiple gift relationships, between human and non-human entities (see Hyde, 2006; Hird, 2010).

Honouring the spaces and times of community

At the core of this new connectedness, for all of the groups in this research, is an intimacy experienced at particular moments between people and the spaces that they inhabit. Many of those in the research recall 'moments' when community happened and, often, the spaces in which these happened (the state of the ground and the task of clearing it remain strong for the Likt community, for example, as do the many people working together in the early potato harvests at TPH). In reflecting Sennett's (2012) arguments about the significance of informal ties, these moments and spaces equate to 'glimpses of community' – those times/spaces where community is present and visible, recognising that this often is not the case and that community may be absent, even when people are together. The role of visual culture, and photography in particular,

in mediating understanding of the spaces of food communities and participation in them, emerged as particularly important.

Fluidity and change

Despite the significance of time and space, all three projects reflect constant fluidity, people coming and going, getting deeply engaged with the work then moving away, having 'done their bit' (it is interesting here to consider the possibility for exchange between 'insider' and 'outsider' status). At Likt this is about moments of engagement with what is often a transient population; introducing young women to the possibilities of gardening and making community through the garden, but equally expecting most of them to move on at some point (the archetypal youth work project). SCF exhibits some of the same dynamic, although this is less about the mobility of the community and more about the ways in which community needs and funding priorities change over time. TPH is different, because there is no broader public agenda to pursue, and the 'member community' is largely static. However, there is still the fluidity of movement in and out of deep engagement. There is also a strong dynamic of work shifting from 'volunteers' to 'professionals'. Many projects start largely as volunteer programmes, staffed by those who wish to participate. Over time these projects either get taken over by paid staff (as funding becomes available), or they fall away as the volunteers lose interest. This suggests, to some, the notion of often being at a 'crossroads' with new directions to choose and new connections to make in order to new the vigour of the project.

The therapeutic community

The therapeutic qualities of gardening are made most explicit at Likt, and underpin

some of the core work of SCF. They are also exemplified in the care home and associated activities at TPH. Yet all three projects suggest that therapy goes far beyond the formal institutional frameworks demanded by youth work and social services, to embrace all those involved. Many people involved in the projects describe their sense of peace, or fulfilment, or health, when engaged with farming and gardening. Some participants experienced this more deeply – describing the conversations that they have had in the allotment or field as ‘better than any counselling session.’

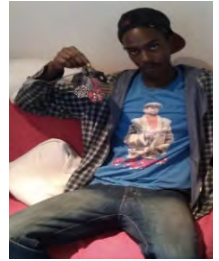
The community maker

There is an emerging theme around the identity, role and understanding of ‘community makers’ – people (or maybe even events) that contribute significantly, or define, the community. At SCF, for example, Lutfun Hussein is closely identified with the Coriander Club, which is viewed as one of the ensuring successes of the farm. At Likt there are stories about the originators of the allotment project, and the youth workers remain significant to the sustainability of the project. At TPH there are many stories about the significance of the milk round and, in particular, the milk deliverers as makers of community. There are also strong memories and associations with key events in the project’s history – the early community meetings, the first harvests, signing to the animals on Christmas Eve.

Contribution to the Connected Communities Programme

This proposal addresses many of the key themes of the Connected Communities programme, particularly health, wellbeing, sustainability and security. The CSA and community food movement reflects both

empirical and contemporary practices and understandings of connected communities, as well as incorporating many aspects of difference. It also invites a strongly interdisciplinary perspective which can add value to a number of current and recent RCUK funded research projects and programmes. At its core, reflecting current debates in sociology and anthropology, is a tension between continuity and change. But this is not the conventional schism between stasis and fluidity (Bauman, 2000). Rather, for many of those in the three projects, it is much more a celebration of how people connect, disconnect and reconnect over time and space. This is the lived experience of community for many people. Being connected is thus about specific performances of community in individual times and spaces, framed by a sense of enduring community. This is significant for the Connected Communities Programme: *change is fine*; it does not connote failure or weakness, but more a dynamic present in all the communities in the study. Indeed, there are questions about the extent to which continuity is necessarily synonymous with success, if the continuity is associated with a lack of energy or initiative, or with maintaining barriers. Land and food are central to connecting and sustaining communities. Many of those in the projects construct their connection to the communities as one of ‘civil labour’ (Rojek, 2001; DeLind, 2002); a gesture of ‘reinhabiting’ land for the purpose of life-sustaining food production that demands a new politics of working that expresses individual and collective identities and desires for health, security and well-being.



The 'talking quilt': Spitalfields City Farm & Active Art



The project team visiting the Likht allotment (July 2011) and the Likht community visiting Tablehurst and Plaw Hatch Community Farms (Sept 2011)



Exhibition at Tablehurst Farm open day, June 2011

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Project outputs

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Links to key project participants

ActiveArt

www.active-art.org/

Likt Young Women's Health Project

www.likt.org.uk/

Mirko Beutler – Director of Photography

www.mirkobeutler.com/

Spitalfields City Farm

www.spitalfieldscityfarm.org/

Tablehurst and Plaw Hatch Community Farms

www.tablehurstandplawhatch.co.uk/index.html
also <http://transitionforestrow.org/video/tablehurst-farm-tour>



www.connectedcommunities.ac.uk