

JAFSCD COMMENTARY

Treatment of racism and social injustice in addressing complex topics: What we learned

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Upon the initial release of our report, *A Regional Imperative: The Case for Regional Food Systems* (Ruhf & Clancy, 2022), we received criticism about our “treatment of racism and racial equity” from the Northeast Sustainable Agriculture Working Group (NESAWG), the report’s original sponsor. While this criticism was unsettling to us and was not accompanied by specific feedback, we acknowledged that we could have done more on the racial justice aspects of regional food systems. Despite lengthy sections on social justice, references to oppressed communities, and suggested remedies throughout the text, our original report

fell short in certain important ways, and we wanted to strengthen it.

As a path forward, we worked with the Thomas A. Lyson Center for Civic Agriculture and Food Systems to publish and promote the report as a “discussion version.” We solicited public feedback and convened a Discussion Team of four scholar-practitioners of diverse backgrounds, expertise, and experience. They commented on the report’s language and omissions with respect to racism and racial inequity. Beyond these concrete corrections, the process of reflection and dialogue with our Discussion Team deepened our own ex-

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Disclosure

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ploration of how to treat racism, racial equity, and social justice in endeavors such as our report. We share these reflections here, and also refer the reader to the final report (Ruhf & Clancy, 2002).

While we, two elder white women, have fought for social justice for many decades in various arenas and strive to work in allyship with oppressed communities, we recognize how easy it is to take our whiteness for granted. It has been humbling to navigate our response to the negative reactions and to being publicly “called out” without feeling or appearing defensive. Certainly, the experience has increased our awareness about the hurt that can be caused, regardless of its inadvertent or unintentional origins.

Treatment Strategies

We want to better understand how oppression can or should be treated in studies like ours where the topic, in this case regionalism and regional food systems, is multidimensional. Our report elaborates on seven dimensions of regional food systems, including food needs and supply, economic development, and social and economic justice. There are various ways to treat oppression when it is one of many parts of a broad and complex subject. It can be genuinely or gratuitously acknowledged. It can be ignored. For white people for whom confronting racism and promoting equity are core values, these approaches are not options. We have arrived at five treatment strategies: centering, intersecting, framing, infusing, and informing. Following discussion of the five strategies, we share observations on the current “call-out culture,” and offer a few suggestions for addressing racism and other forms of inequity in studies of other topics.

Centering. When NESAWG criticized us for not “centering” the report on race, we wanted to understand what that meant. NESAWG does not have its own working definition of centering race (Northeast Sustainable Agriculture Working Group, 2022). We learned from various sources that centering race and racial equity is envisioned in different ways. Many organizations publish racial equity statements in which they commit to centering racial equity by holding it as a core value, operating with it as a priority, and confronting

structural racism in their work. For Kania et al. (2022), strategies for centering equity include grounding the work in data and context and targeting solutions, focusing on systems change in addition to programs and services, shifting power and building equity leadership, and acting with community. Lina Houston, an attorney of color, addressing white people, offers “7 ways to support and center people of color,” including recognizing and checking privilege, understanding oppression, recognizing intent versus impact, educating oneself and one’s white friends, and collaborating and connecting with communities of color (Houston, 2016).

The lens, or orienting framework through which a particular topic is addressed is relevant, indeed consequential in food systems work as in other endeavors. For example, Passidomo argues that there is “need to go ‘beyond food’ through research that positions food as a lens through which pressing social and political issues and processes may be critically examined” (2013, p. 92). The analytical lens might be capitalism, patriarchy, ecofeminism, or a particular religion, for example. For some groups, which may include NESAWG, centering means viewing ideas and actions exclusively through a racial justice lens, solely or primarily based on the direct experiences of and analyses by persons and groups of color. To be clear, we believe that “white centering”—the centering of white people and their values, norms, and feelings over others (Saad, 2020)—has no place in the work of advancing social justice.

We believe that each centering orientation has merit and power. In our report, we center fighting oppression and advancing racial equity and, more broadly, social justice, as core values and central strategic priorities. That said, the report is not written through a racial justice lens; such a specific focus was beyond our scope and capacity, and would have been misguided and presumptuous without substantial direction, if not lead authorship, by partners of color. We hope that others will contribute racial equity analyses of regional food systems.

Intersecting. In food systems, multiple forces of oppression and marginalization are at work. As systems thinkers, we looked at how and where op-

pression and regional food systems intersect. These intersections are noted throughout the report. We point out the patterns and consequences of oppression on various groups and in certain settings *in the context of regional food systems*. We also point out that in some ways, a region in itself may not be an especially effective scale at which to address oppression and advance social justice. Nonetheless, we discuss many reasons and opportunities to be attentive to social justice at a regional scale. It seems to us that the intersections between oppression and a particular concern will vary depending on the content, context, purpose, and audience. Nevertheless, authors and researchers should always be accountable to social justice values.

Legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw (2017) has offered a more particular take in coining the term “intersectionality” (now included in standard dictionaries) to describe how systems of oppression overlap and how multiple marginalized social identities interact and compound the impacts of oppression. This concept of the interconnected nature of social categorizations such as race, class, and gender certainly applies within food systems. Intersectionality could appropriately describe how race, ethnicity, and gender are layered upon members of other marginalized—that is, distanced from power and resources—communities such as small farmers, farmworkers, and food-chain workers.

Framing. In our 2007 chapter on social change movements in food systems (Stevenson et al., 2007), we discussed framing as the process of describing social problems around shared meanings that can mobilize groups to action. Frames differ in their comprehensiveness. Master frames are most inclusive, bringing together various subissues and networks and providing a unifying message. (Note: While we recognize that the word “master” may be offensive to some readers, the term “master frame” is embedded in sociology and social movement theory.) Racial injustice is a highly mobilizing frame, within which the particular dynamics of the Black, brown and Indigenous experiences are sub-frames.

In food systems, a more comprehensive frame focusing on oppression can include marginalized groups such as immigrant and refugee farmers and

consumers, farm and food workers, low-income rural and urban food shoppers, and some agri-food business owners. In our report, social justice—the fair distribution of social benefits and opportunities—is a master frame that includes the multiple marginalized, oppressed, and disadvantaged groups who were discussed in the report. The power of this master frame comes in part from its potential to point to structural concerns.

There are pros and cons as to how issues are framed in material such as our report. One challenge for a broad master frame is the fact or perception that attention to a particular issue or group is superficial or diluted. Certainly, the history and experience of Black people in the U.S. is unparalleled, and its salience cannot be overstated. On the other hand, an advantage of a powerful master frame can be in strategic overlap and complementarity, resulting in greater strength, solidarity, and impact for change. Perhaps it merits emphasis that our overarching reason for advocating for stronger regional food systems is for their contributions to sustainability, resilience, and social justice.

Infusing. In this context, infusing means to fill or imbue material in order to affect it substantially. Several academic institutions (e.g., University of Memphis, 2021; Champine, 2021) and nonprofit organizations have committed to infusing justice, equity, and diversity into their curricula and programming, by addressing how racial inequities are relevant to and confronted in related material, filling gaps and inaccurate representations, and assuring that information is adequate and appropriately sourced. For us, it means acknowledging the roots of contemporary inequities and placing analyses in their historic and multicultural contexts.

From the beginning of our writing, we strove to infuse the report, including our suggestions for action, with concerns about oppression and equity. At times the frame was specific to race; at other times social justice was the relevant master frame. Our Discussion Team helped us identify more places in the report that would highlight the inequities faced by particular communities of color. There is always the challenge that an infusion is superficial or otherwise insubstantial, which raises questions such as, What is adequate or optimal?

How much emphasis? For what purposes and audiences? Who determines?

Informing. What sources are used to inform works such as this report? What information and review procedures are appropriate, legitimate, sufficient? As white women, we acknowledge the boundaries of our lived experience. We are not persons of color, farmers, food workers, or people who have experienced food insecurity. Having researched, published, presented and collaborated on food systems, and more specifically regional food systems, for several decades, we have had experience in seeking a variety of reputable sources of information and opinion. We pursued the best available resource material and input about racial equity and social justice—data, research, articles, and lived and reported experience—under our given circumstances, and utilized them in as many places as made sense to us.

Nevertheless, the three years during which we researched and wrote this report were greatly affected by COVID-19, the Black Lives Matter movement, and unprecedented political turmoil. Understandably, many people were stretched beyond usual pressures during that time and thus we did not obtain as much outside expertise, particularly from members of communities of color, as we diligently sought over several years. We understand and accept that these limitations to our information gathering and review processes caused hurt, and for some readers compromised the integrity of the report.

As with infusing, questions arise with the processes of gathering information and with the sources of information. Who are the authors? The partners? Are sources diverse? Appropriate? Reputable? How much input and review, and by whom? If one reviewer of color is not sufficient or credible, are four reviewers? Ten? What is the nature of the review process? How do researchers best access and present the lived experience of the constituents they seek to champion?

Calling Out or Calling In?

Several months after the report's initial release and feedback, we read several articles (e.g., Ahmad, 2015) and a book by a woman of color (brown,

2020) which placed our personal experience in a larger context. Like some others commenting on current "call-out" culture, where people are publicly confronted, criticized and ostracized as toxic, adrienne maree brown describes this phenomenon of public shaming and "knee-jerk collective punishment" as "elicit[ing] a consistent and negative energy" (brown, 2020, p. 26). She laments how call-outs "humiliate people in the wake of ... conflicts and mistakes. ... What concerns me is how often it feels like this instant reaction is happening within the movement" (pp. 41, 43), when quick judgment and cancellation are supposed to make offenders "learn to be better," rid the movement of "bad people," and prove the bona fides of the accusers.

From our own experience, we agree with brown (2020) that "call-outs don't work for addressing misunderstandings, issuing critiques or resolving contradiction" (p. 46). Like brown and Ahmad, we agree that call-outs for egregious behavior or when other measures fail are sometimes appropriate. However, "call-ins," based on dialogue rather than public excoriating, are more likely to move us all toward transformation. We agree with brown that as a movement, we are in "dangerous territory not aligned with a transformative justice when we mete out punishments ... with no time for the learning and unlearning necessary for authentic change" (p. 49). We resonate with brown's systems thinking: "How do I hold a systemic analysis and approach when each system I am critical of is peopled, in part, by the same flawed and complex individuals that I love? ... If I can see the ways I am perpetuating systemic oppressions ... I start to have more humility as I see the messiness of the communities I am part of, the world I live in" (p. 68).

Being shamed and ostracized for the shortcomings of our report left no space for the transformative work of asking, together with our accusers, what can we learn and how can we grow from this experience? How can we all do better at holding the complexity of the systems, situations, and relationships in which we co-exist? We feel fortunate to have colleagues who have shared and supported us in our journey, including our Discussion Team and report editors.

We deeply agree with brown (2020) that

“movements need to grow and deepen ... to become the practice ground for what we are healing toward, co-creating. Movements are responsible for embodying what we are inviting our people into” (p. 57), for asking careful questions before leaping to judgment and shame. With brown, we “feel like we are responsible for each other’s transformation” (p. 74). We hope these reflections make a contribution.

Good Practices


What are some good practices for white people engaged in research, analysis, and other undertakings in this time of greater racial awareness? For those seeking to advance equity and be good “co-abolitionists,” borrowing brown’s term, with people from oppressed communities, stumbling is inevitable. We appreciate the work of others who have similarly pondered this question. From our experience and reflection, we offer a few suggestions.

- Be clear about the purpose and scope of the endeavor, and expectations. At times, blurring the lines between scholarship and activism can contribute to food justice work (Reynolds et al., 2018).
- Be transparent about the authors’ qualifications and limitations. Acknowledge the “ways that we are complicit in unjust systems and ways that we benefit from them” (Levkoe, 2021, p. 611).
- State upfront how oppression, equity, and social justice will be addressed in the material. Describe and justify the approach, which may include one or more of the strategies described above.
- Everywhere that it is appropriate in the project, lift up the historic and contemporary injustices, struggles, and successes experienced by communities of color and other oppressed groups, and at a minimum, acknowledge root and systemic causes.

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- Acknowledge the challenges presented by language. Terminology evolves, and certain terms and expressions may offend some readers but not others, even within like-minded groups. “Language and terminology ... are forever shifting and almost impossible to keep up with. In such a context, it is impossible not to fail at least some of the time” (Ahmad, 2015, para. 4).
- Prioritize diversity and inclusion in developing the material. Seek diverse and relevant information and partners, and explain the process used to obtain them. In our report, we drew directly from material, including policy and program recommendations, that was developed by individuals and groups of oppressed and marginalized communities.
- Employ universally accepted processes to advance knowledge and justice by inviting feedback, correction, additions, and further analyses. For example, we welcome others to comment on this report and to analyze regional food systems through the lenses of race, gender, class, capitalism, etc.
- Practice cultural humility in research and presentation. Incorporate different ways of knowing and sources of knowledge.
- Include strong values statements about oppression and equity, regardless of the topic. Be willing to step up and take action.

We have learned a lot. We understand more clearly how to employ all methods to build knowledge, increase awareness, promote dialogue, and advocate for change toward a more resilient, sustainable, and just food system for all. We know that ally work is ongoing and that it requires reflection and humility. Our experience has reminded us how crucial—and fragile—trust is. Despite missteps, we need to be in this together, in all our stumbles, hurts, *and* achievements. 

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