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Consumer Perceptions and Coping Strategies of consumers committed to eating local in Michigan (USA)

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Abstract

American consumers are presented with an increasing number of reasons to buy and eat local food products. One refers to the importance of the origin of the products they purchase. A second, and closely related reason, refers to being concerned about the food miles, or the distance foods have traveled from where they are grown or raised, to where they are purchased or consumed. If the act of "eating local" is often presented as beneficial and virtuous (for example, health, environment, community development and civic responsibility), it also embodies obstacles such as the time and sometimes skills required for both shopping and preparation. Such obstacles often discourage many from buying local fresh produce. This paper draws on the results of several focus groups with consumers in Michigan who are committed to eating local. The paper offers insights into how these consumers cope or balance their commitment to eating local with the constraints they face on buying and preparing local food.

Keywords
Local food, consumption, coping strategies

Perception des consommateurs et stratégie de coping des consommateurs engagés dans l'achat de produits locaux au Michigan (USA)

Résumé

Les consommateurs des Etats-Unis sont de plus en plus incités à acheter et consommer des produits locaux. L'une des raisons est l'importance de l'origine des produits que l'on achète. Une autre raison est celle de la préoccupation par rapport aux « food miles » c'est à dire la distance parcourue par les produits entre la production et l'achat. Si le fait de consommer local est souvent présenté comme vertueux (pour la santé, l'environnement, le développement local ou la responsabilité sociale), il présente des obstacles tels que le temps passé et les compétences nécessaires pour les achats et la préparation. De tels obstacles peuvent décourager l'achat des produits locaux. Cet article présente les résultats de plusieurs focus groups avec des consommateurs du Michigan impliqués dans l'achat de produits locaux. Il permet de comprendre quelles sont les stratégies de coping utilisées par les consommateurs pour concilier leur engagement et les contraintes auxquelles ils doivent faire face lors de l'achat ou de la préparation des produits

Mots clefs
Consommation, Produits locaux, stratégies de coping

CONSUMER PERCEPTIONS
AND COPING STRATEGIES OF CONSUMERS COMMITTED TO EATING LOCAL IN MICHIGAN (USA)

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ABSTRACT

American consumers are presented with an increasing number of reasons to buy and eat local food products. One refers to the importance of the origin of the products they purchase. A second, and closely related reason, refers to being concerned about the food miles, or the distance foods have traveled from where they are grown or raised, to where they are purchased or consumed.

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This paper draws on the results of several focus groups with consumers in Michigan who are committed to eating local. The paper offers insights into how these consumers cope or balance their commitment to eating local with the constraints they face on buying and preparing local food.

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RESUME

Les consommateurs des Etats-Unis sont de plus en plus incités à acheter et consommer des produits locaux. L'une des raisons est l'importance de l'origine des produits que l'on achète. Une autre raison est celle de la préoccupation par rapport aux « food miles » c'est à dire la distance parcourue par les produits entre la production et l'achat. Si le fait de consommer local est souvent présenté comme vertueux (pour la santé, l'environnement, le développement local ou la responsabilité sociale), il présente des obstacles tels que le temps passé et les compétences nécessaires pour les achats et la préparation. De tels obstacles peuvent décourager l'achat des produits locaux.

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[1] The authors are listed in alphabetical order. Julie Sage, Engineer student in agronomics sciences, in Montpellier SupAgro, France, wrote the first draft of this article. Jim Bingen is Professor of Community, Food and Agriculture at Michigan State University; Lucie Sirieix is Professor of Marketing at Montpellier SupAgro, France and member of UMR MOISA 1110.

consommateurs du Michigan impliqués dans l'achat de produits locaux. Il permet de comprendre quelles sont les stratégies de coping utilisées par les consommateurs pour concilier leur engagement et les contraintes auxquelles ils doivent faire face lors de l'achat ou de la préparation des produits

Mots clés Consommation, Produits locaux, stratégies de coping

Introduction

To an outside observer, it certainly seems that the local food movement is alive and thriving in Michigan, a northern US state bounded by three of the Great Lakes.[2] Since 2005 the number of farmers markets in the state has grown from around 90 to over 200 in 2009! The *Taste the Local Difference* directory of fruit and vegetable farms, wineries and local restaurants around the greater Grand Traverse Bay in the northwest part of the state continues to be in high demand. At the same time, in the southeast region, the new publication, *Edible WOW,* literally flies off the shelves.[3]

But what does it mean to be a "locavore" in Michigan? What does it mean to be committed to "eating locally" when you live in a region where the climate creates serious limitations on the availability of "local food" for at least six to eight months of the year? How do Michigan's locavores cope with this constraint? What kind of "eat local" strategies do they pursue and what kind of trade-offs do they make in order to "eat local" throughout the year?

This paper reports the results of a short and exploratory investigation of the perceptions and coping strategies of a small group of local food consumer "activists" –those committed to, and those who promote "eating locally" in Michigan. Following a brief review of discussions surrounding different definitions of local food, this paper outlines an analytical framework based on the concept of coping strategy, presents the methods for collecting preliminary information about local food coping strategies in Michigan and then discusses the perceptions and coping strategies of these activists.

What Does Local Mean?

"Locavore" may be the Oxford Dictionary 2008 word of the year, but it still leaves the "local" in local food open to multiple definitions. Local food does mean different things to different people (Wilkins, Bowdish and Sobal 2002), but it expresses a value-based awareness and conscious food choice-making by consumers. As a result, "local foodies" stand out from mainstream food shoppers in both their perceptions of

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[2] The research upon which this paper is based was undertaken as part of J.Sage's academic requirements during her studies as a visiting scholar at Michigan State University from January through June 2009.

[3] *Edible WOW* (WOW stands for the names of 3 very densely populated counties in southeastern Michigan: Washtenaw, Oakland and Wayne) is edited in Michigan *and* published as part of nationwide "Edible Communities" network of local food publications (www.ediblecommunities.com).

food production and distribution and their food purchasing behavior. One commonly hears how important it is to "know what you are getting," or to "know where our food comes from," or about the "transparency" and "trustworthiness" in food purchasing relationships. At the same time, appeals are made to a wide range of other values such as the environmental impacts (transportation costs and food miles) of our food choices, the need to support one's local economy and community, the creation or improvement of a social network, and the better taste, higher quality and health benefits of eating locally.

Perhaps the most common definition of local food derives from the distance between the point of production and the point of consumption. This, of course, is the idea behind the "100 mile diet." In the US, this is commonly interpreted to mean food grown within the governmental unit of a county or sometimes even a state (Wilkins, Bowdish and Sobal 2002). For example, in a recent telephone survey in Michigan, almost 50% of the respondents defined local food as food grown in Michigan. About 18% reported that local food consisted of food grown in the Great Lakes region or within 100 miles. Approximately 11% said that local means food from the county of the consumer, and less than 4% indicated that local had to be food grown by a farmer known to the consumer.[4]

While a definition of "place" in local is recognized,[5] two of the most common sets of definitions are based on attributes ascribed to local food by consumers. For some, local food is preferred because of its "taste, freshness and quality," or because it is assumed to be "healthy" (Anderson 2008). These features are identified as intrinsic to the food products and include notions of the food as more authentic and higher quality (Weatherell et al., 2003), as well as fresher (Jekanowski et al., 2000; La Trobe, 2008) more nutritious, tasty and safe (Seyfang 2004). In addition, some ascribe more extrinsic and even somewhat abstract features to local food. These involve notions of the contribution of (purchasing) local food to environment and community building (Seyfang, 2004), "sustainability," "food security," environmental preservation, animal welfare and human rights (Anderson 2008). While this latter set of attributes is still consumer-based it draws upon a more ethical and altruistic dimension that involves a "moral and aesthetic anchor" in food choices (Warde 1997) and expresses a relationship between consumer behavior and change in the industrialized food system (Follett 2008).

In addition, the choice of local food involves relationships that go beyond the act of eating. Those choosing local frequently value the relationship with farmers and food producers based on reciprocity, trust and shared values (Gilg and Battershill 1998; Hinrichs 2000; Marsden, Banks and Bristow 2002). Some may also see eating locally as a means to reconnect with rural roots and traditions (Montanari 1994). Local food can also be defined as what the food system looked like before its industrialization. In that case, coming back to or discovering, local food can be seen

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[4] Personal communication, Susan Smalley, C.S. Mott Group for Sustainable Agriculture, Michigan State University.

[5] For example, Herrin and Gussow (1989) refer to local food as "food grown in a common, specific bioregion, under a common watershed, soil types, climate, and vegetation."

as a coming back to or creating, cultural traditions and roots.

Analytic Framework

If the easy availability of so-called "fast" and "cheap" food in the US creates difficulties for those who want to eat locally, living in the upper Great Lakes region of the country raises even more hurdles. For most people, fresh and local produce may be available at most from late May through September. Even with access to a farmer who uses unheated greenhouses (hoop houses) to "extend" the growing season, eating locally for the better part of the year means eating a variety of root crops. Eating locally is a continuum and, eating local consumers eat differing proportions of local products. However, eating local food year around is inconceivable for most Michiganders. For others, it is like putting together the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle. Eating locally from October through May involves resolving whole sets of new questions: what to eat and from where? What are the substitutes for leafy greens? How many different ways can root crops be prepared and served? What crops can be preserved and what are the best ways of doing so in order to maintain flavor and quality?

In short, "going local" in the northern regions of the US requires important adaptations in food purchasing, preparation and eating. It may also require shifts in family budgeting and a greater allocation of income to food purchases. Given the growing numbers engaged in making this shift, it is useful to apply the analytic concept of coping in order to gain some insights into understanding the perceptions and behavior of locavores in Michigan.

With its origins in psychology, Lazarus and Folkman (1980) define coping as the cognitive and behavioral efforts "to manage specific external or internal demands (and conflicts between them) that are appraised as taxing or exceeding the resources of a person" (page 141). As summarized by Bruchon-Schweitzer (2001), coping refers to specific behavioral and psychological efforts that people employ to master, tolerate, reduce, or minimize stressful events. Considering the context of local food, this definition draws our attention to three dimensions of coping and, two types of coping strategies: problem-centered strategies and emotion-centered strategies that are especially useful for our study eating local in Michigan.

First, coping involves a transaction or a process of reciprocal action between an individual and a situation. This includes a strategy or strategies for managing a troublesome situation. As such, a coping strategy is one which is adapted to, or changes a disturbing situation. For Bruchon-Schweitzer, coping is a process that is constantly evolving and that is more complex than a linear stimulus-response phenomenon. This ever-changing characteristic of this process is due to the unceasing assessment of the individual relative to the situation. In short, as a basis for making behavioral decisions individuals perceive and assess specific situational or environmental antecedents in terms of the nature of the situation, its length, its controllability and the availability of support for a response. While assessing the situation, the individual also identifies the type of resources at hand, how to mobilize them, and how efficient this mobilization will be regarding the situation (71). These resources mostly involve time, organization, money and personal skills like cooking.

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Specifically, understanding how local food activists perceive the current food system situation offers insights into the reasons for their decision to eat locally and/or become involved in the local food movement.

Second, there are dispositional determinants to coping. According to Costa, Somerfield and McCrae (1996), coping strategies are not specific but general since they are defined by stable characteristics of the individual (namely personality traits), and not variable characteristics of the situation. Coping is therefore specific to individuals; individuals choose a preferred strategy based on an individualized assessment of an adverse situation. From this perspective, the individual is less affected by the "objective" characteristics of the situation and more by the way the individual perceptions, interpretations or assessments of it (Cohen, Kamarck and Mermelstein 1983). This distinction between individuals making the effort to identify the reasons for which the situation is problematic to them and those who do not sheds light on the type of coping strategy they will initially adopt. This awareness, associated with knowledge, beliefs and the significance shapes perceptions and determines the type of coping strategy implemented (or chosen), along with the ability to mobilize one's resources and the capacity to make trade-offs.

Third, coping involves a way for dealing with a problem. It represents a strategy for making a situation less demanding while increasing the efficiency of one's resource mobilization when facing it. (71) This part of the strategy usually includes two components: the solution of the problematic aspect of the situation (research of information, action plan development) and the confrontation of the situation (efforts, action plan implementation).

With these features in mind, two types of coping strategies have been distinguished. One includes problem-centered strategies in which an individual faces and accepts the disturbing aspects of a situation, and for which resource mobilization is efficient. A second includes emotion-centered strategies which tend to be more fatalist and sometimes less efficient with respect to resource mobilization. Research indicates that people use both types of strategies to combat most stressful events (Lazarus and Folkman 1980).

Recent consumer research has examined the consumer behavior through the theoretical lens of coping and has produced rich insights in the domain of consumer reactions to persuasion, negative emotion or technological innovation (Duhachek and Kelting, 2009). To our knowledge, the coping strategy conceptual framework has not yet been used in the food behavior area and might offer a new way to think about and explore how local food consumers perceive the need to eat local as well as their decisions to act on these perceptions: For example, a consumer who wants to cook with a local produce and cannot find it may decide to use a local substitute (problem-centered strategy) or give up the idea of the recipe (emotion-centered strategy).

Methods

The exploratory research upon which this article is based involved a series of guided focus group discussions completed by individual interviews, and the review of

popular magazines, newspaper articles and blogs about local food in Michigan and the Midwestern US.

Focus-Groups. Given the aim of this exploratory research project, the use of focus-groups represented an appropriate method to identify and discuss perceptions about local food and coping strategies (Krueger 1994). The focus group approach offers the opportunity to explore a complex topic such as food choices because it allows the participants to present their ideas, and to hear and to respond openly to the ideas expressed by other participants (Morgan and Kreuger 1993). The setting provides the opportunity to identify and explore how individuals perceive local food as well as benefit from the open exchange of views related to a range of issues surrounding the availability of local food.

Three focus group discussions were conducted with local food consumers and growers who participate in, or are members of the MSU Student Organic Farm in East-Lansing, the East Lansing Food Cooperative and the Huron Valley Slow Food Convivium in Ann Arbor between April and May 2009. All of the participants could be considered as politically active and socially aware of environmental and food system issues and concepts such as local (Wilkins, Bowdish and Sobal 2002). Table 1 presents the occupation, gender, age, and background (in terms of living in urban, suburban and rural locations).[6] Through key contacts in each of the groups, the participants were recruited through email newsletters, announcements and word-of-mouth.

A semi-structured interview protocol was developed to address many of the key issues raised in the literature dealing with consumer perceptions and behavior related to local food. The discussion guide was divided into three parts. The first part focused on perceptions of local food and aimed at identifying the different definitions and ideas associated with the term. For example, the discussion began with very basic questions like "What is local?", or "What does local food mean to you?" These questions acted as "ice-breakers" since they generated a very diverse set of responses that helped illustrate the range of opinions related to these basic questions. In doing so, these questions helped to establish a shared understanding of the idea of local and thereby define the parameters of the discussion themselves instead of being influenced by the discussion facilitator (Chambers et al., 2007).

The second set of open-ended questions dealt with a range of questions concerning the main reasons that initiated the individual decisions to turn towards local food, as well as the advantages resulting from such a decision. These questions sought to learn more about their consumer behavior, as shoppers, cooks or eat-out consumers. Questions that aimed at identifying constraints (or barriers) to getting more involved into the local food movement were included. Ultimately, the aim of this set of questions was to assess whether their behavior matched their perceptions, or if their perceptions were more questions of principle and unrelated to their everyday consumer behavior.

The third set of questions was oriented towards their feelings of empowerment as

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[6] Prior to beginning each discussion, the participants were asked to complete an information sheet that was used to compile the data used in table 1.

local food consumers and their strategies regarding how to strengthen the local food movement within the current food system.

In order to ensure consistency across the groups, each discussion was facilitated by the same interviewer (Chambers et al., 2007). Each discussion lasted from 1 to 1.5 hours and followed the semi-structured discussion guide described above (Krueger 1994). Each session was recorded, but the facilitator also recorded notes on the discussion following the pre-prepared discussion guides.[7] After briefly describing and explaining the purpose of the project, the subject of the project, was explained to the participants. The interviews started with an explanation of the study. The discussion guide was reviewed and all participants were given a guarantee of anonymity and confidentiality for their responses. The facilitator emphasized that "there were no right or wrong answers" to the questions. Instead the participants were assured that the point of the discussion was to collect their opinions, whatever they may be. The flow of the discussion was determined by the participants and new questions were addressed only after the participants felt that they had "completed" their discussion of the previous question.

Other Data. In addition to the focus group discussions, individual interviews were held with three individuals who are recognized local food spokespersons in Michigan. Two of these individuals were engaged in informing and advising consumers through websites and blogs, while the third interviewee organizes farm tours for consumers from the Midwest. These interviews used the same interview guide as the focus groups, but for some questions the interviewees were asked to provide both a personal answer and an answer that reflected their perception of how the consumers with whom they worked might respond. Finally, publications on local food in Michigan, Michigan local food websites and blogs were used to complement information collected from the focus groups and interviews.

The next section provides and interprets the results of the focus groups. The other data have only been used to complement the interpretation.

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[7] The recorded discussions were not used for reporting the data presented in this paper since the facilitator notes conveyed the main points of the participants.

Table 1. Focus Groups: Demographic Characteristics
Group 1 East Lansing Food Coop Members

Profession	Gender	Age	Background (rural/urban/suburb)	
			Current	Growing Up
Teacher	F	62	Urban	Small Town
Researcher/outreach	F	28	Suburban	Suburb
Attorney	M	60	Urban	Urban
MSU Faculty & Organic Grower	M	69	Urban	Rural (Michigan Farm)
Graduate Student	F	25	Urban	Rural
Actuary	M	25	Urban	Suburb
Librarian	M	58	Urban	Urban

Group 2 Student Organic Farm

Profession	Gender	Age	Current	Growing Up
Retired Social Worker	F	56	Rural	Rural farm
Student Farmer	F	24	Urban	Suburb
Student Farmer	F	28	Urban	Rural
Student Farmer	F	45	Rural/Urban	Urban
Student Farmer	F	26	Urban	Suburb
Student Farmer	F	23	Urban	Urban
Student Farmer	M	22	Urban	Urban
Student Farmer	F	23	Urban	Suburb
Student Farmer	F	24	Urban	Urban
Student Farmer	F	27	Rural/Urban	Suburb
Student Farmer	F	53	Rural/Urban	Urban
Student Farmer	F	23	Rural/Urban	Urban & suburb
Instructor	M	32	Urban	Rural
Farmer	F	21	Urban	Urban
Student Farmer	F	49	Suburban	Suburb
Instructor	F	35	Urban	Rural

Group 3 Slow Food Ann Arbor (Huron Valley) Convivium Members

Profession	Gender	Age	Current	Growing Up
Writer & Librarian	F	45	Urban	Suburb
Graduate Student	F	29	Urban	Urban & Suburb
Info. Tech Mgr	F	44	Urban	Urban
Teacher &. Tutor	F	74	Urban	Farm
Court Admin	F	62	Urban	Urban

Perceptions and Coping Strategies

This section provides and interprets the results of the exploratory research with local food activists in Michigan. The first part presents the local food situation as seen by these activists. In addition to presenting some of their views on industrialized agriculture, this part discusses their perceptions or definitions of local and local food, including their perspectives on the values and qualities of eating locally. The second part identifies the dispositions these activists have, or the various reasons why they decided and continue to eat locally. Part three discusses the coping strategies used by these activists to eat locally before moving in part four to an assessment of the ways in which eating locally has contributed to their feelings of empowerment.

The Problem – Industrialized Food and Agriculture

In 2003, Pirog and Benjamin (2003) described the situation that confronts most local food activists. They wrote, in the US "food travels farther to reach consumers because their food system no longer relies on their own farmers to fully supply a number of food items ... The typical American prepared meal contains on average ingredients from at least 5 countries outside the US". Lucy Jarosz (2008) captures another dimension in noting that for "most Americans food production and processing occurs far away from where they live and buy their groceries ... This system encourages a separation between land and people, farm and city and plant/animal growth and human observation." Wendell Berry might be credited as one of the first to draw our attention to these issues in *The Unsettling of America* (Berry 1997), but from films such as *Food, Inc.* and *Fresh to a White House garden*, it does seem as if we are witnessing the emergence of some type of local food movement.

Those participating in this study echoed several of these concerns about the nature of the industrialized food system in the US. As one person commented, "most shoppers don't know what knowledge or skills are involved in farming ... For them, food is pretty much an abstract idea-something they do not know or imagine-until it appears on the grocery shelf or on the table." Some could link this back to broader changes such as the "loss of farms and rural communities" or even US laws that do not require origin labeling for food in retail groceries. The participants tend to confirm the "vast amnesia" (Berry, 1988) that occurs as local food systems decay (Giovanucci, Barham and Pirog, 2009) or the fact that "consumers are increasingly disconnected from food production and distribution (...) as consumers are not aware of the ways and means by which their food reaches them" (Anderson, 2008, page 596). In contrast, the participants in this study think more in terms of "eating responsibly" or seeing "eating as an agricultural act." As one individual commented, it's related to "feeling good about eating, but good as a more moral and ethical dimension than a hedonist one."

Defining Local in Michigan

The diversity among those participating in this study generated a wide variety of perspectives on both the meaning of, and limits on eating locally in Michigan. For many, their distance or relationship with growers forms the core of local food. While

many agreed that "food miles" is part of local, the discussion of local often generated definitions that referred to food "delivered by the person who grows it," or "knowing where it comes from." This could be interpreted somewhat broadly as one participant suggested that local food could be produced "by an artisan or a company headquartered in Michigan, using a high percentage of Michigan-grown ingredients."

Others evoked the notion of bioregions in identifying local food as "food that grows in Michigan's climate," or is from the "Great lakes region (including Ontario)." As one individual indicated, local food is "created in the same watershed [and this] would be the Great Lakes … [This] watershed is a geographic barrier but also represents opportunities."

There were equally diverse expressions of the benefits to eating locally. As expected, participants referred to the "flavor and comfort" of local food, its "freshness," and its "cleanliness, or lack of residues or contaminants." As one individual put it, local food "is fresher than anything in the supermarket and that means it is tastier and more nutritious." Reinforcing this idea, another participant emphasized the ways in which local food is "more sensual, you smell it and its good; it adds pleasure to meals."

But broader benefits were also evoked. Participants talked about benefits to the environment and more specifically to the Michigan economy. Local food is seen as a "huge energy savings" and "respectful of animal welfare." Given the pervasive economic crisis in Michigan, the contribution of eating locally to "the overall health of the community" arose several times during the discussions. There were frequent references to eating locally as a way of "keeping money where you're living (an economic investment);" it was a way to help "improve the Michigan economy." More specifically, eating locally represented a way to help "the local food system grow and remain viable;" buying directly from family farmers helps them stay in business."

Several discussed the lifestyle dimensions or the ways in which shopping and eating locally has brought a new and improved dimension to their lives. As one participant indicated, "I find food much more exciting now that I have to wait for seasons." Eating locally provides a "deeper connection with what you are eating." For many, eating locally also meant new social connections and networks. In addition to reconnecting with food, the participants also discovered a "whole universe of new friends who share the same values." In addition to the joy of "getting to know farmers and food producers," the ideas of "being part of a community" and "connecting with people" were discussed frequently.

These comments by the participants in this study suggest that we might consider them as part of the "neo-tribe" consumers who express a heightened awareness of socio-economic issues related to food and farming and readily link the foods they buy to the production origins and methods underlying them (Weatherell et al., 2003). As Table 1 indicates, the demographic and socio-economic diversity represented by the participants confirms the idea that "demographic variables are simply not very precise means of assessing [consumer] preferences [for local food]" (Zepeda L., Li

J.,2006).[8] The participants do not represent higher income or social class consumers who might seek more flexibility or ease in their food choices. Instead this group tends to share values and lifestyles and they make their food choices based a variety of reasons from "a desire to reconnect with rural roots" (Montanari 1994) to a concern with seeking a "moral and aesthetic anchor" for their food choices (Warde 1997). This group seeks a relationship with farmers based on reciprocity, trust and shared values. They seek to become real actors in the food system, and in doing so enter a social network in which they share common values on food and find mutual support to deepen their involvement in the local food movement.

At the same time, the participants were quite realistic about the limits of eating locally.[9] Reflecting a very pragmatic approach, the notion that "it depends on where you live; some places it is easier than others" was commonly expressed. As a reminder of the realities of living in the upper Great Lakes region of the US, one person commented, "most of the local food outlets are closed down in the winter."

Others were equally concerned about the limited accessibility of local food to all socio-economic groups of consumers and to the need for more broadly based education and communication to inform more people about the availability and benefits of local food. Many felt that most local food consumers were insufficiently informed about the availability of local products, including the constraints that farmers face. In other words, not all products are available all the time, and they may not be "picture perfect" in shape, size or color. But as one participant recognized this is one of the dilemmas in small, local systems – they often lack the capacity for this kind of broader communication and education. This situation poses a broader question for local food activists. If more consumers are to eat locally, then ways will need to be developed in order to provide them with the information to convince them about their food habit trade-offs.

The Turn to Local

Dispositions for Action. As noted above, the dispositional determinants to coping are not variable characteristics of a situation. Individuals choose their preferred coping strategy(ies) based on their own perceptions, interpretations and assessments . Some of these assessments can be seen as part of emotionally-based coping strategies. Statements by some of the participants in this study reflected this kind of disposition. As one person indicated, "I think hard about the food that goes into my child's body, I want something that is doing no harm…" Or, "I'm learning that one of the important ways loved ones want to relate to a baby is through food … We want to feed him from our table as much as possible … to feed him with [the family's] own, home-grown foods." Similarly, another participant said, "All the time I spent trying to figure out what was OK to feed my family made me acutely aware of the extent to

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[8] This contrasts with many studies indicating that the typical local-food shopper is female, college educated, and with an above-averaged income (Brown 2003; Eastwood, Brooker and Gray 1999; Govindasamy, Italia, and Adelaja 2002; Kezis and al. 1998).

[9] Nevertheless, it should be noted that when the question about the limits of local food was asked towards the end of the discussion, most participants found the question disturbing; it nearly always generated a somewhat separate discussion to clarify the meaning.

which … the pool of foods from which I felt safe feeding my family was getting smaller and smaller." For some, these concerns involved their pets: "Our dog (a beagle named Charley) was affected by the tainted pet food recall … It occurred to me that if pet food from China contained melamine, human food might also contain this and other potentially harmful ingredients."

For others, concerns that were deeply personal became the basis for an awakening to a political consciousness and questions about the food system and food safety. One participant noted, **"**I read Michael Pollan's *Omnivore's Dilemma*. It changed my life. This book helped me see nutrition and food politics/food policy in a new light. I felt as if I'd awakened from something." And another offered, "I realized that food and environment was the biggest issues in our current society."

Eating Local Strategies.
Regardless of their dispositions behind or motives, those committed to eating locally must develop their own strategies for achieving this goal. Different strategies will depend upon an individual's level, and type of awareness of the "food situation," but it will also vary according to one's ability to mobilize the resources (or gain control) necessary to carry out a specific strategy. These resources could range from time, organization, money or even the cooking skills required. Moreover, specific activities could include have a personal garden, shopping at a local farmers market, joining a CSA, buying directly on farm, or simply paying attention to the origin of food purchased. Studies indicate that eating locally creates challenges since many consumers find it easier to trade off their perceived benefits of local food against expediency factors such as price, accessibility and convenience (Lappalainen, Kearney and M.Gibney 1998).

Given the need to eat seasonally if one wants to eat locally in the upper Great Lakes region of the US, one of the questions posed to all of the focus groups was: Considering that we are in the Upper Midwest, how do you adapt to the difficult availability of fresh produce? Somewhat surprisingly, participants did not consider seasonality as a barrier to their strategies. One comment summarized the approach from all of the groups and interviews: "I haven't thought about it as a constraint because it is the opposite: a way to get better food, there are more bonuses than minuses." As others indicated, "sometimes you have to do without." You do have to "change your diet and eat apples instead of oranges." And one participant, summarizing an overall pragmatic approach expressed in the groups, said "I'm not a locavore purist. In the winter I will purchase fresh produce from out of state."

On the other hand, the discussion around the question of time-constraints related to buying local and preparing fresh produce was quite animated. It appears that the responses and approaches to this issue varied by the length of time that individuals had been involved in seeking to eat locally. Those who were just starting raised the standard problems. "There are three things that always bother me. I don't have time to find or prepare local food; it costs more; and, I'm really not ready to give up the food I like such as strawberries in January – even if they taste like cardboard." Similarly, as another participant stated, "I just don't have time to grow my food … and I have difficulties with the whole canning/preserving/freezing thing. Besides, I

don't have space to keep all this stuff." These participants tend to be more fatalist and adopt emotion-centered strategies.

But for those with more experience, overcoming some of the barriers is a question of trial and error over time. "Yes, it was extremely time consuming at the beginning, almost impossible with a full-time job. But I learned how to be more efficient, to go faster, and as a result the time required becomes less difficult to manage." Another participant confirmed this adaptive approach: "It means having a different concept of time. It's about priorities and making choices to take the time and benefit from the pleasure and excitement that eating locally generates such as making my own yogurt, jam, bread." To eat locally means "to learn slowly how to eat more locally."[10]

In order to gain additional insights into eating local strategies two specific questions related to very practical, everyday activities such as food preparation and to dining outside the home were included. The first question was: When a recipe requires a non local or non-seasonal ingredient (for example, a Mango), do you change the recipe or do you still buy that ingredient? This question generated a wide range of answers. For some, the option was to use a local substitute. As one participant observed, "Cooking is not an experiment, you can always adjust the recipe and use substitutes." Others preferred to follow the recipe even if it meant using a non-local ingredient which can be seen as an emotion-based strategy, since they surrender when facing the problem. Some put forward other arguments to justify their choice "The quality of the product is another important factor". But among this group of respondents, some would spend time to find an item that also embodied some of the principles of local, such as a fair-trade or organic product that for them carried a sense of support of a community or environmental sustainability. On the other hand, others took a much more pragmatic approach that they did not see as weakening their commitment to eating locally "So yes, we still buy the ingredient when it makes sense, and substitute when it does not. We are not local purists – just local enthusiasts."

A second question was: What does this local food movement mean when you go out to eat? What do you do when you go out to eat? Responses to this question reflected less flexibility on the part of most participants. Most felt that eating out is generally not consistent with eating locally largely because of the very limited number of restaurants that seek to use local products. Many said that they "always ask about the origin of the food" since there were many dishes, especially salads that could be made with local ingredients such as dried cherries. At the same time, several participants acknowledged that the servers never knew about the origin of the products used on the menu.

Observations. The responses to these questions offer the opportunity for some

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[10] Interestingly, participants did not voluntarily raise the issue of the higher cost of local food. When the question about costs was asked specifically the responses were somewhat equivocal with most feeling that local food cost about the same, or perhaps was even cheaper than food available in the supermarket.

interpretation. First, it appears that many of these activists take a very pragmatic approach to eating locally. When local products are not available, many will make the effort to find substitutes that share many attributes of local food, such as fair trade or organic products. This effort to seek consistency with one's beliefs, perceptions and resources is typical of a problem-centered coping strategy. It also reveals a concrete awareness of the dimensions and impacts of local foods. In contrast, it is possible that those who complain about the unavailability of local products may be those who are either "new" to eating locally or those for whom their strategy is more emotion-based and less oriented to problem solving.

Beyond Coping: Feeling of Empowerment

At a minimum, choosing to eat locally can be considered as empowering because it represents the expression of a specific decision to participate in a localized food system in contrast to a more passive participation and acceptance of the food choices presented by an industrialized and globalized food system (Follett 2008). This somewhat limited, choice-based definition of empowerment becomes more robust as individuals reflect concerns with two additional dimensions. First, eating locally offers the opportunity to know who produces the food and as a result to identify the origin of their food.[11] Second, participating in the shorter local food supply chain encourages action to strengthen relationships within local communities, to establish producer-consumer relationships based on fairness and equity, and to help keep buying power within the community. These kinds of actions can help redefine the role of consumers in the marketplace (Zepeda and Li 2006). As such, these actions may facilitate the establishment of food democracy and contribute to more sustainable environmental practices (Pettit and Wheeler 2005).

In addition, developing a sense of empowerment might be an unexpected outcome of eating locally. By eating locally, some might begin to realize their enhanced control over their food choices that in turn leads them to adapt their coping strategies. That is, many may begin to understand that food is not just about eating, but involves multiple social, economic and political dimensions. As this occurs, these food activists may start to see themselves more as citizens than as "mainstream" consumers. They discover rights and their own enhanced level of awareness about their role in the food system.

The following question was posed to all of the groups: "To what extent do you feel like contributing to make the movement of local food grow? Do you feel empowered as a "local food consumer"? Quite enthusiastic responses and lively discussions ensued. "Absolutely YES! I feel very empowered. Consumers are becoming increasingly aware and there is an enormous potential. It's the coolest thing going on in the state. You know where food dollar goes. It circulates and multiplies within the community. There are many opportunities contributing in a variety of ways, such as helping farmers markets to start, presentations about personal experiences and what can be done to get involved." Another said, "Yes, I do feel empowered. I contribute with my time and energy. I spend a fair amount of both advocating local food

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[11] As captured in a new USDA program, "Know Your Farmer, Know Your Food."

choices." And more broadly, "acting locally helps our society in the sense that it lessens the negative impact of the food system."

These comments clearly express an eagerness, if not need, to reconnect with the sources of their food and for expressing and sharing personal values about the food system. Only two participants out of thirty-one were either troubled by or did not respond positively to the relationship between eating locally and empowerment. These individuals found it difficult to understand how being a local food consumer was related to feeling empowered. In addition, these individuals expressed some frustration since they felt a lack of family support for their decision to eat locally.

When all participants were specifically asked what kept them from feeling more empowered, it became clear that empowerment was as much a process or continued effort as it was an outcome. Many noted the "hurdles" to eating locally, as well as the costs and trade-offs at a personal level. But as many recognized, this is ultimately a collective phenomenon. We "need more local food consumers." "It's easy to change individually but much harder to act collectively, convince people and make them discover by themselves."

The questions related to what they would do to change the current food system, strengthen the local food movement and gain additional support generated considerable and enthusiastic discussion that also illustrated to diverse ways in which local food activists conceive of current food system issues. For some, it was about educating others from those in school to adults, and especially health professionals. Others focused on changing public policy and laws: "Laws and rules should be revisited and reviewed because [they] keep people from having a lot more access to local food products." And as another stated, we need to stop subsidizing corn crops and use the money for healthy crops. We need to switch from a 'sickness system to a health system'." Even more dramatic suggestions included taxes on "junk, non-nutritive and non-healthy foods." Many also had some very concrete ideas for supporting change including the use of the media to raise awareness, building upon Michelle Obama's interest in local food and finding more innovative ways to link grocery stores with local farmers.

Despite the wide range of responses, the discussions with food activists clearly illustrated an overall pragmatic approach to eating locally. They see many opportunities to improve the food system and to playing a more active role in the local food movement.

Observations. As the discussions illustrated, the process of coping in order to eat locally is dynamic. This is, based on the comments by participants, it appears that once an eating local decision has been made, there is a continuing evaluation and assessment of the situation that serves as a sort of feedback that may generate a reconsideration of initial dispositions and perceptions and therefore of the coping behavior. With this in mind, it is likely that many of those who chose to eat locally based on emotion-centered dispositions may move to more problem-centered perceptions of the food system and behavior. An important part of such changes involves an increased appreciation of the reasons for the artificially low cost of most food in the US and the real costs and benefits to farmers and consumers of eating locally. Other changes and perceptions may take longer. The time required to shop

and prepare local products is both a question of availability and of learning (sometimes) new food cooking and preparation skills.

Final Comments

The Approach and limits of the study

This paper presents the results of an exploratory study of local food activists in the central part of Michigan (USA). These results are preliminary but they suggest the usefulness for more refined study and more in-depth analysis based on the coping strategy conceptual framework. This framework offered a new way to think about and explore how local food consumers perceive the need to eat local as well as their decisions to act on these perceptions.

Given time and logistic limitations this study involved a small number of local food consumers/activists. Thus, only very cautious generalizations about local food coping strategies can be made. In addition to increasing the number of discussion groups, organizing different groups of local food activists and non-activists would offer a complete and comparative understanding of the issues surrounding local food coping strategies. In addition, holding discussions in different states or countries would also improve our comparative understanding of these strategies.

In addition, this study dealt with declared coping strategies and it would be interesting to complete it with a study of actual observed coping behavior.

Conclusion

The transition to eating locally generally involves pursuing different coping strategies. The committed consumers we interviewed mostly adopt problem-centered strategies: they change their food-consumption habits including shopping (frequency, retail outlet visited, etc.), purchasing (buy in bulk, quantity, etc.), cooking (new recipes, canning, preserving, etc.), storing and obviously, eating. None of these changes are easy to implement, and most require re-allocations of time as well as trade-offs to overcome time and cost barriers. When local food is not available, local food consumers make efforts to find substitutes that share as many attributes as local food's to adjust coherently according to their beliefs, perceptions and resources. In return, local food consumers feel empowered and part of a dynamic social network that offers support for eating responsibly.

However, some consumers we interviewed also tend to surrender to a lack of availability of local food, which can be considered as recurring to emotion-centered coping strategies. This shows that the type of coping strategy adopted can vary from one consumer according to the context (the season within the year, outside or inside one's home,…), the controllability of the situation to another according to the level of commitment and awareness.

This study allows us to offer a working hypothesis that the process is dynamic: the more committed consumers are, the more they adopt problem-centered strategies and forget emotion-centered strategies which tend to be more fatalist. The length of involvment could thus be a key issue regarding food choice strategies. These findings about consumers in Michigan who are committed to eating local could thus be

tested in other contexts. From a practical point of view, if this hypothesis is confirmed, it could be useful to build communication strategies oriented towards less committed consumers. The communication could put forward problem-centered strategies and the feeling of empowerment, but it also assumes that changes are made in the current food system for conventional consumers to be willing to make trade-offs to overcome time and cost barriers.

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