

# ***Food Shopping as Social Practice: Navigating Access in Lower Income Communities***

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Photo: Grist.org





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# **Two Broad Streams of Research.....**

## **1. Food Environments**

Structural focus on food supply and retail composition

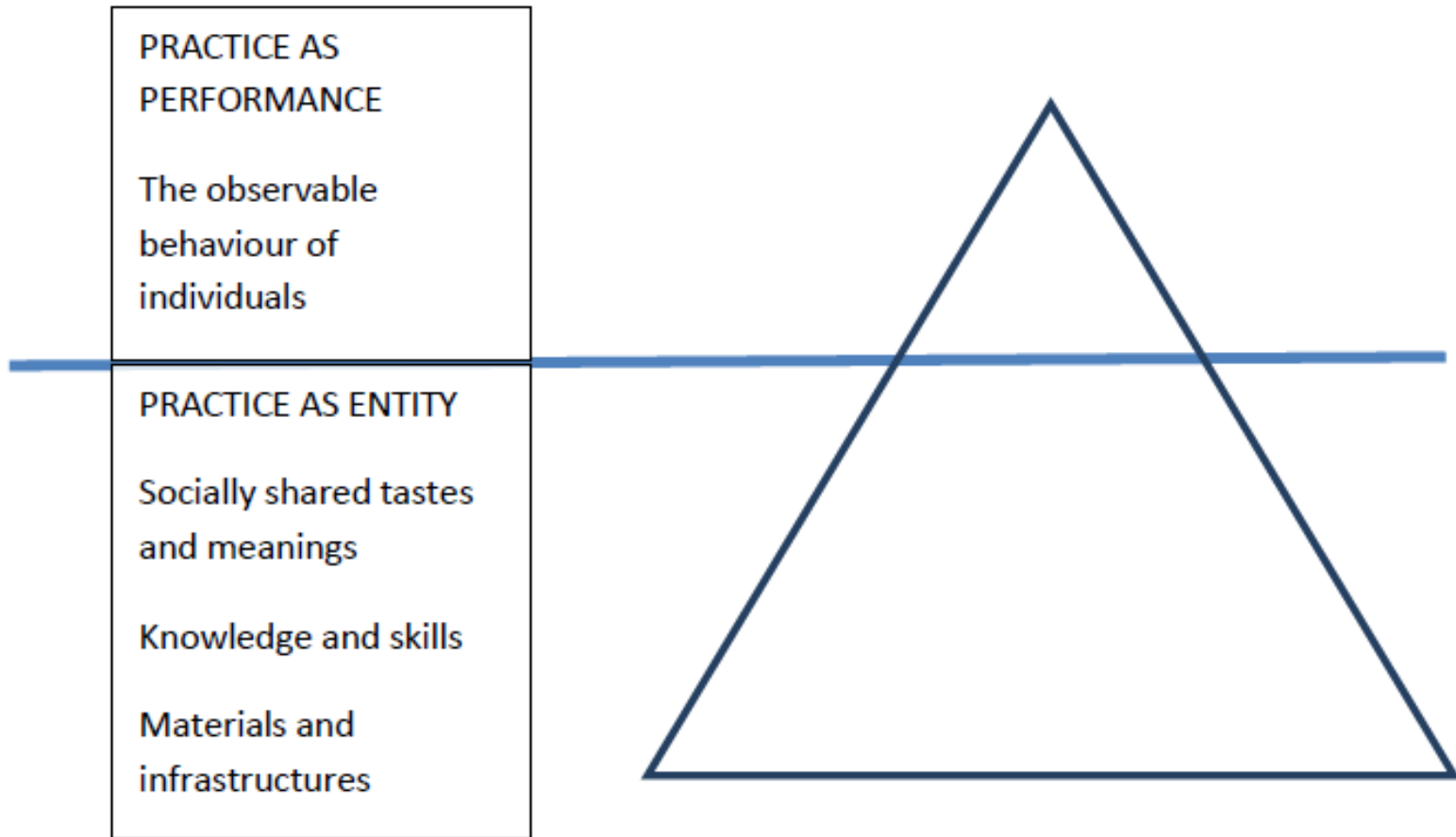
## **2. Individual Food Behaviors and Choices**

Voluntarist focus on motivations, will, impact of education and information

# Food Shopping in “Deprived” and “Marginal” Communities

- Situated cognition [Zachary et al. 2013]
- Routines and styles [Thompson et al. 2013]
- Foodways of the urban poor [Alkon et al. 2013]

# Reconsidering Shopping as Social Practice



Source: Spurling et al., 2013



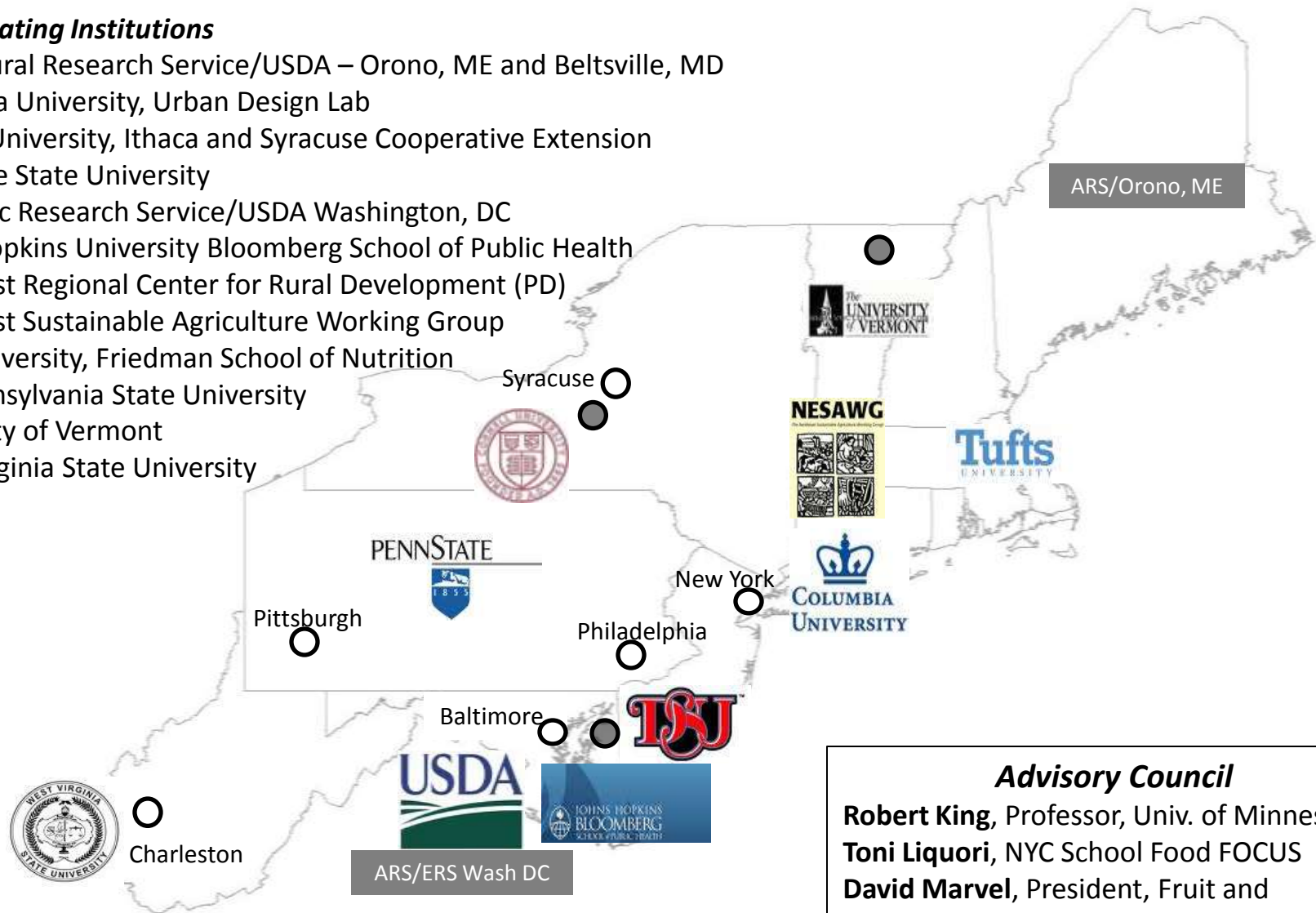
**How do knowledge, materials and meaning configure in the experience of food shopping in lower-income communities?**



# Enhancing Food Security in the Northeast: Project Sites & Collaborators

## Collaborating Institutions

Agricultural Research Service/USDA – Orono, ME and Beltsville, MD  
Columbia University, Urban Design Lab  
Cornell University, Ithaca and Syracuse Cooperative Extension  
Delaware State University  
Economic Research Service/USDA Washington, DC  
Johns Hopkins University Bloomberg School of Public Health  
Northeast Regional Center for Rural Development (PD)  
Northeast Sustainable Agriculture Working Group  
Tufts University, Friedman School of Nutrition  
The Pennsylvania State University  
University of Vermont  
West Virginia State University



## Advisory Council

**Robert King**, Professor, Univ. of Minnesota  
**Toni Liquori**, NYC School Food FOCUS  
**David Marvel**, President, Fruit and Vegetable Growers Assoc. of DE  
**Joyce Smith**, Operation Reachout Southwest, Baltimore



- Rural Study Sites (DE, NY and VT)
- Metro Study Sites



# Study Design: Overview

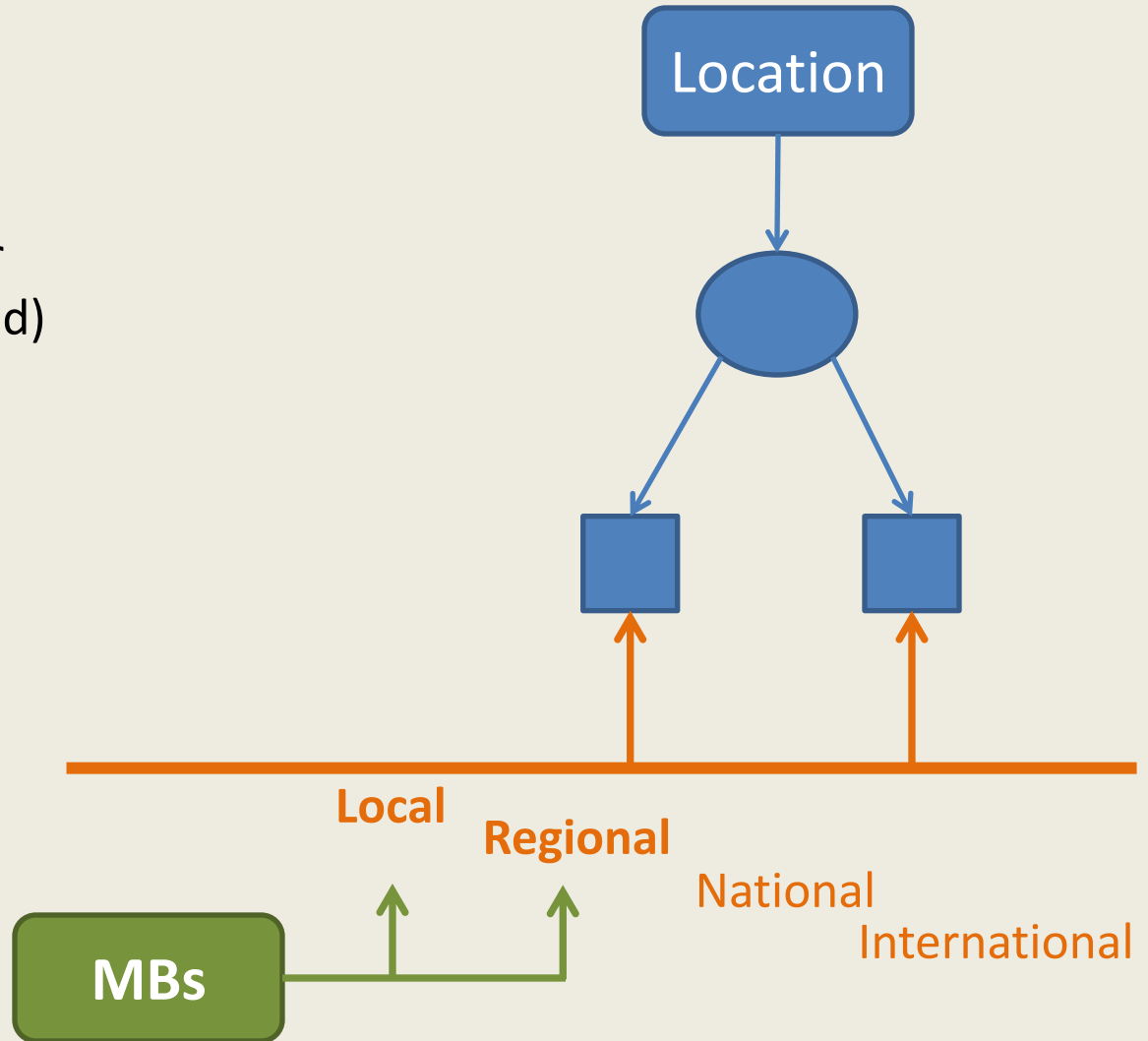
One of 9 locations  
(e.g., Baltimore)

One or two neighborhoods or  
communities per (underserved)  
location; focus groups

One or two stores per  
location; consumers  
patronizing the stores; MBs

Supply chains,  
business owners

Agricultural production  
capacity, 300 NE counties



# Studying “Consumption” in the 9 Study Locations

- **Aim**: Understand constraints and opportunities for improving access to healthy, regionally sourced food
- **Activities**: Focus groups, consumer intercept surveys, store environment study, “healthy market basket” inventory, “community strategy”
- **By whom**: Researchers, extension educators, community partners, students



# The Focus Group Component

- Wave One: 17 FGs in 9 locations conducted 2012-13
- FG guide developed collaboratively by Consumption Team
- Topics: Food availability and changes, food buying practices, healthy food access, regional food
- Approach: “A guided, collective conversation”





# **Focus Groups:**

## **Process, Procedure, Participants**

- Selection criteria: Primary HH shoppers who shopped at study store(s) in study location
- FG facilitation by Consumption Team members/associates
- Completion of short written survey by participants
- Completion of FG fieldnote form by facilitators
- ~ 90-minute FG sessions in community space; recorded, professionally transcribed, analyzed

## Focus Group Participants (15/17 groups reported)

<b>CHARACTERISTIC</b>	<b>All Focus Groups (N = 15)</b>	<b>Maximum Focus Group</b>	<b>Minimum Focus Group</b>
<b>Female (percent)</b>	<b>72</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>40</b>
<b>Age (mean)</b>	<b>53</b>	<b>80</b>	<b>35</b>
<b>Household size (mean)</b>	<b>2.7</b>	<b>5.7</b>	<b>1.1</b>
<b>Children 17 or younger (mean)</b>	<b>0.8</b>	<b>2.2</b>	<b>0.0</b>
<b>Years living in study community (mean)</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>45</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>Receiving public assistance (percent)</b>	<b>47</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>0</b>
<b>Diet-related disease in household (percent)</b>	<b>30</b>	<b>60</b>	<b>0</b>

**How do knowledge, materials and meaning configure in the experience of food shopping in lower-income Northeast communities?**

Across groups, people “shopped” the neighborhood store, but also shopped elsewhere and outside, to the extent they could....

# Shopping Practice: Store Operations Knowledge

- About food deliveries
- About managers and staff
- About store brands
- About sell-by dates

“Well, I know the best time usually to shop that I hear is Wednesdays because that’s when mainly all of the fresh produce and everything is delivered and shipped in and ready to start for the... Yeah. I’ve kind of learned to shop on a Wednesday.” [Pittsburgh]



# Shopping Practice: Circulars, Coupons and Sales Skills

- Keeping rules and calendars straight
- Looking for healthy deals
- Finding sales with “great prices on things that aren’t good for you”
- Following up with management on sales that “run out”



# Findings: Store “Infrastructure” Can Be Impediment or Lure

“You get a cashier with a bad attitude and then you get a customer with a really bad attitude and then they end up having a fight in front of you and you’re just like yo, what’s up? I’m just trying to get my milk for my baby.” (New York-Harlem)

“One thing he did over there has nothing to do with food, but I love him for it. He put in a new floor and it feels good on my feet.”

(Pittsburgh)

# Findings: Meat as Pivotal Product

“Shopping is about where it’s the cheapest and the quality of the meats. Some stores get better meat than others.”  
(rural New York)

“And then that one, they usually have a butcher right in sight and a lot of the meat when they get it is not being frozen. He’ll cut it, and put it right in the cooler right there, instead of hitting the freezer with it.”

(Syracuse)

# Findings: Meanings of the Neighborhood Grocery in an “Underserved” Area

- Noted as convenient, though rarely seen as sufficient
- “You’ve got to use caution” (Baltimore)
- Neighborhood being “written off” by food retailers (NYC- Harlem)
- They’re trying to “accommodate” us (Pittsburgh)
- They’re family-owned, not like Food Lion or Walmart (rural Delaware)



# Findings: Unhealthy Pleasures Can Offer Small Dignities

Woman 1: “My grandchildren love their cotton candy there, that cotton candy. It’s almost like the circus cotton candy and only \$2 a bag, that’s really reasonable, very cheap. So Wayne was talking about taking it off the shelves and Gino is like, that’s one of our top sellers. He’s like, I won’t let you take it out. And I thanked Gino for that. I’m like, because you’re saving me from taking my kids, my grandkids, taking them down to the circus, just so they can get some cotton candy. “

Woman 2: “You can’t always afford to go to the circus, but you usually can afford two bucks for cotton candy.”  
(Pittsburgh)

# Discussion: Navigating Food Access

Preliminary findings here echo other research

- Knowledge, strategies for food access
- Commitments to, yet frustrations with “the neighborhood store”
- Shopping outside the neighborhood was common in “underserved” areas with a neighborhood grocery

Contribution in unified study approach across diverse urban and rural sites in the Northeast U.S.

# Caveats and Next Steps

- Focus here *general food shopping practices*, not only healthy food shopping.
- Can small and medium independent groceries serve underserved communities or are they increasingly residual and irrelevant?
- Can insights about shopping practices inform policies and programs to increase healthy food access?



Photo: Public Power

# Questions?



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**Enhancing Food Security in the Northeast**

<http://agsci.psu.edu/research/food-security>



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