

*Master of Science
in Global Sustainability Science*

Rethinking local food initiatives: A qualitative exploration of sustainability values, collective action and political perspectives

Master's Thesis

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Submitted on: June 29th, 2018

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Abstract

Often characterized by intense commoditization, heavy ecological footprint, and monopolistic governance mechanisms, the present-day industrialized food system has contributed to a growing distrust among citizens around the world. In response to this, local food initiatives promoting sustainable food and agricultural systems have formed. Little empirical research exists regarding how these local food initiatives think about their experience in relation a relevant conceptual framework. As such, this research entails the development of a conceptual framework based on Schlosberg and Cole's (2015) sustainable materialist frame and literature regarding how local food initiatives may be characterized. This consists of sustainability values, collective action and political perspectives. Thirteen participants from two local food initiatives in Lüneburg, Germany were interviewed to provide in-depth insights into participant perceptions in relation to the three dimensions. Results indicate that participants exhibit strong values related to sustainability (e.g. knowledge of food origin, environmental concern, etc.), and appreciate the practical, collective work of the initiative. Additionally, a clash was found between initiative goals and participants' perception of a lack of commitment and strong uniformity in the initiatives. Furthermore, many participants expressed political motivation and even perceived group actions as counter to the mainstream food system, although both initiatives did not identify as a politically motivated. This research sheds light on opportunities and barriers for initiative success and indicates the potential for the developed framework to serve as a lens for understanding other social initiatives aimed toward sustainability transformations.

Keywords: local food initiatives, sustainable materialism, sustainability values, collective action, political perspectives

Introduction

Over the past several decades, agricultural systems have changed dramatically throughout the world. As a result of technological advances coupled with growing urban demands caused by population shift, many food producers have transitioned from small-scale farming to industrialized methods of mass production (Tilman et al. 2002). The resulting present-day mainstream industrial food system, which often includes a heavy ecological footprint, social inequality and monopolistic governance mechanisms, has been widely acknowledged as a threat to sustainable development (Gottlieb and Joshi 2011; Vittersø et al. 2005). Characterized by intense commoditization and an increasing physical and social distance between food producer and consumer, the industrialized food system has contributed to a growing distrust among citizens around the world (Lacy 2000; Renting 2003). In response to this growing disconnection between food production and food consumption, grassroots movements for sustainable food and agricultural systems have formed (Henderson 1998). This has resulted in alternative food and agricultural initiatives at the local level in numerous countries (Feenstra 2002).

The ideals of such local food systems can be characterized as economically viable, environmentally sound and are considered to be a type of agriculture that does not diminish the land or its people (Henderson 1998; Berry 1977). Additionally, these systems are commonly considered to be an attempt to rework power and knowledge relationships between producers and consumers (Anderson and Cook 2000). Recent food movements have taken many forms including community supported agricultural programs, community gardens, food policy councils, farmers markets and others (Papaoikonomou and Ginieis 2017; Schlosberg and Cole 2015). Very often these groups are coined as alternative agricultural groups, local food movements, local food systems and/or local food initiatives. For the purpose of this paper, the term ‘local food initiative’ will be primarily employed.

The work of local food initiatives has been investigated in a number of ways. Research conceptualizing these initiatives has generally focused on aspects related to justice and political dimensions (Winter 2003; Allen 2010; Laforge et al. 2017; Mount 2012), the environmental impact of local food (Cleveland et al. 2014), social embeddedness and collective action (Trivette 2017), and consumer motivations (Starr et al. 2003; Rainbolt et al. 2012). Moreover, empirical case studies about local food initiatives have typically centered on specific motivational factors, demographic characteristics, examination of general narratives and practices, or comparing specific attributes between local food systems (Papaoikonomou and Ginieis 2017). Furthermore, literature incorporating theoretical frameworks has primarily focused on theorizing food systems as a whole, with few examples of practical application in real-world settings (Eriksen 2013; Schlosberg and Cole 2015; McCormack et al. 2010).

Thus, literature centered on local food initiative case studies has concentrated primarily on specific characterization aspects (e.g. motivational factors, demographics, etc.). However, there is little theoretical progress linking, aggregating and conceptualizing these

micro-insights. A better understanding of how these entities work together may provide valuable insights into how local food initiatives across different practices can be understood as broader social movements in the context of sustainability transitions.

As a means of investigating this research gap, an overarching conceptual framework combined with empirical research involving contrasting case studies is necessary and piloted in this study. For this investigation, a conceptual framework has been developed. The conceptual framework is based on the sustainable materialist frame by Schlosberg and Cole (2015) and supported by fundamental aspects of local food initiatives found in further literature. It includes the following dimensions: Sustainability values, collective action and political perspectives. Using this developed conceptual framework as a base, the objective of this study is to explore how participants think about their experience in their respective local food initiative. Thus, the research is guided by the following question: “How do participants in local food initiatives characterize their experience in relation to sustainability values, collective action and political perspectives?”

In order to apply the conceptual framework to a practical setting while addressing the research question, a qualitative research design using semi-structured interviews was employed. This entailed thirteen semi-structured interviews with participants from two local food initiatives in Lüneburg, Germany. This paper summarizes the findings and is outlined as follows. First, a theoretical background is provided, incorporating literature regarding the main characteristics of local food initiatives. Second, an overview of sustainable materialism followed by the development of a new conceptual framework will be presented. Third, methods employed for the study’s qualitative approach will be examined. Next, the interview findings will be presented, followed by a discussion of the findings in relation to the paper’s research objectives. Finally, a conclusion of the study will be presented, accompanied by suggestions for further research.

Theoretical Background

Local food initiatives have historically been studied as an expression of values centered on sustainability and concern for the local (Feenstra 2002; Laforge et al. 2017). Some of these initiatives are especially concerned about the environmental impact of high food miles and therefore focus on regional production (Pratt 2007). Common negative external factors noted include greenhouse gas emissions, changes in land use, deforestation, and biodiversity losses (Papaioikonomou and Giniesis 2017). Another argument commonly emphasized regarding local food movements and sustainability lies in the importance of connecting (or ‘re-connecting’) people to their food. This includes the value placed on the connection between producers and consumers, as well as between consumers and their food source. Mount (2012) posits local food as an alternative to the disconnected relationships often found in conventional food systems. Renting et al. (2003, p. 398) extend this argument by offering that the changed agricultural practices associated with local food systems are “a ‘shortening’ of relations between food production and locality, [...] potentially configuring a reembedding of farming towards more environmentally sustainable modes of production.” All aspects considered, many participants within these local

food initiatives perceive local control of food production as being basic to sustainability, as it facilitates greater care for the environment and reconnects people to where their food comes from (Henderson 1998; Renting et al. 2003).

Another defining feature of local food initiatives lies in their collective nature. The aspect of collectiveness can be thought of as a type of social embeddedness – often involving “principles of connectivity, reciprocity and trust” (Sage 2003, p. 47) in addition to healthy social relationships, cooperation and civic engagement (Feenstra 1997). In other words, local food initiatives can be thought of as social networks often embedded in the ‘local’ concerning knowledge and understanding of certain places (Eriksen 2013). Integration of aims, beliefs and strategic decisions is also often central to these initiatives (Hassanein 2003).

The collective action exuded by local food initiatives is often characterized as political or embodying social justice (Feenstra 1997). Scholars argue that local food initiatives offer a counter-pressure to the challenges in the large conventional food system, increasingly portrayed as a form of food activism and political resistance (Eriksen 2013; Pappoikonomou and Gineise 2017). Moreover, local control of food has been argued as central to the survival of democracy, offering an opportunity for participatory democracy (Henderson 1998; Feenstra 1997; Hassanein 2003). Contrary to concepts such as locavore, which privilege the individual and have been criticized for lack of real impact on implementing change, local food initiatives are thought to have great potential for implementing change as a result of the inherent participatory democracy (DeLind 2011; Lyson 2004).

Although specific characteristics of local food initiatives are highly contextual and dependent on participants, discussions centered on sustainability, collective action, and politics are ubiquitous throughout the literature. However, theoretical frameworks characterizing local food initiatives are scarce.

Sustainable Materialism

One promising framework for conceptualizing local food initiatives is the sustainable materialist frame proposed by Schlosberg and Cole (2015). Alongside movements centered on renewable energy and making (e.g. crafting, upcycling, etc.), Schlosberg and Cole (2015) suggest local food-focused initiatives as an illustrative example operating within the sustainable materialist frame. The creation of these local food-focused initiatives can be seen as a response to a “concern with the flow of what and how people eat” (Schlosberg and Cole 2015, p. 4). Schlosberg and Cole (2015) suggest that not only are these groups resisting the mainstream system in which they typically reside, they are *re-structuring* the system in terms of the flows of material relationships between humans and the non-human realm. This phenomenon can be understood as a new ethos centered around sustainable materialism. This shift to sustainable materialism can be considered within three analytical frameworks: 1) acknowledgement of the human immersion and connection to the material flows of the non-human realm, 2) greater focus on collective practices and institutions of material flows and; 3) resistance to problematic practices and

circulations of power. These movements can be comprehended as alternative structures to the mainstream. Thus, they replace detrimental material flows that are often problematic for human health and the environment with “new, local and engaged systems of community production and consumption” (Schlosberg and Cole 2015, p. 18).

Sustainable materialism can be thought of as an extension of the cultural theory new materialism coined by DeLanda and Braidotti in the 1990’s, which considers human’s place in the world and the ways we produce, reproduce and consume our material environment (Van der Tuin and Dolphijn 2010). Although much literature exists on the concept of new materialism (Coole and Frost 2010; Van der Tuin and Dolphijn 2012), the sustainable materialism concept proposed by Schlosberg and Cole remains relatively novel. Perhaps the most distinguishing element of sustainable materialism lies in its discussion around the way in which these movements (such as local food initiatives) interact with politics. Traditionally, an individual’s values have been contained in existing political practice (e.g. voting, etc.), whereas now, within these movements they are being incorporated into everyday practices of material sustainability seen as a kind of radical democracy. The assumption is that these movements are working to challenge power and shift to what Schlosberg and Cole (2015, p. 2) call “new politics of sustainable materialism, an environmentalism of every day.” In this sense, these environmental movements become outlets for political frustration through the practices that the group takes part in.

Sustainable materialism provides a novel framework for thinking about key characteristics within contemporary environmental activism movements. However, peculiarities of local food initiatives as described in the literature review, are not fully addressed. Therefore, in order to explore local food initiative perspectives through a theoretical lens, a new conceptual framework has been developed by the researcher in the next section.

Conceptual Framework

Assembling the more general sustainable materialist frame with the peculiarities of local food initiatives as described in the literature offers a promising framework for understanding present-day local food initiatives. The three analytical frames proposed by Schlosberg and Cole (2015) have been extended to encapsulate local food initiative literature, resulting in three new dimensions. These dimensions include sustainability values, collective action, and political perspectives. The conceptual framework is depicted below in *Figure 1*.

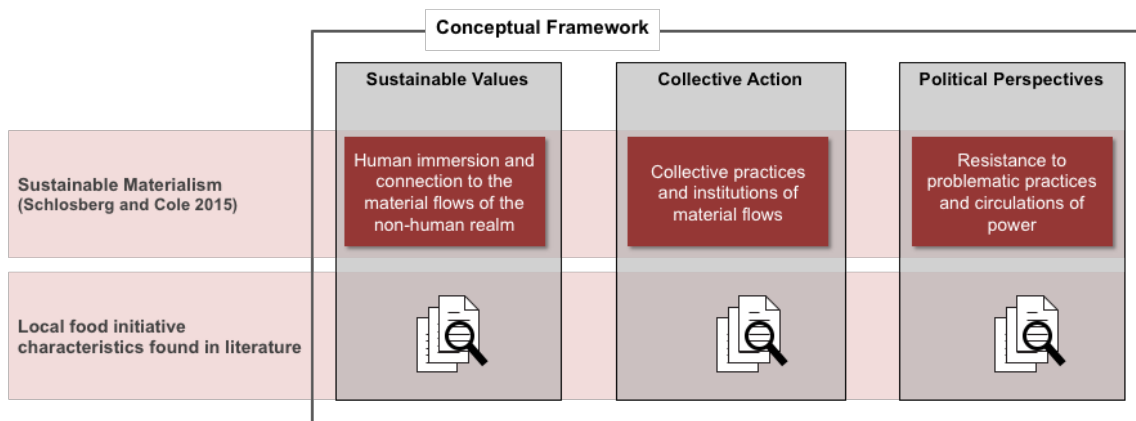


Figure 1: Framework to characterize local food initiatives which consists of the dimensions sustainability values, political perspectives and collective action

This study's exploration of local food initiatives through a lens of sustainability values, collective action and political perspectives has several useful facets. First, it allows for the exploration of characteristics of local food initiatives on a broader level as many multifaceted aspects previously noted in research are taken into account. Second, it may serve as a structure for categorizing local food initiatives' goals, motivations and perspectives. The knowledge gained from employing this framework may yield important feedback when considering opportunities and barriers to success within these initiatives. Furthermore, as the sustainable materialist frame is a more general theoretical perspective of local food initiatives as social initiatives, findings may provide insight into how these initiatives may be understood in comparison to other social initiatives.

In the following section, a description of the methods will take place. First, the selected participants and recruitment procedure will be described. Next, the semi-structured interviews will be explained, followed by a discussion regarding the thematic content analysis conducted.

Methods

Participant and Recruitment Procedure

The city of Lüneburg (population ca. 75,000) is located in northern Germany and part of the Hamburg metropolitan area. This city was selected for the area of study as it has an officially recognized sustainability vision for 2030 with numerous active local food initiatives. The two local food initiatives chosen for this study were WirGarten and Essbarer Campus.

WirGarten, translated in English as ‘WeGarden,’ was created as a vegetable cooperative in 2017. WirGarten consists of about 300 Lüneburg citizens who have joined forces to create a cooperative that leases 8.23 hectares of agricultural land within the city limits of Lüneburg. The goal of the cooperative is to have a diverse, healthy and transparent vegetable supply in the hands of the citizens. The cultivation includes over 30 different vegetable crops and herbs according to certified organic farming criteria. Interested citizens and companies can become members of the cooperative by investing between 100 and 1000 Euros in cooperative shares for the duration of their membership. The vegetables are delivered by bike each week to central locations, where members pick up their crops and get matching cooking recipes for the season. All members can visit the WirGarten fields, volunteer, and participate in events such as garden tours, harvest or canning and cooking events.

Essbarer Campus, translated in English as ‘Edible Campus,’ is an initiative established in 2014 at Leuphana University in Lüneburg. Essbarer Campus is a neighborhood garden consisting of university students and neighbors of the university (e.g. community centers, kindergartens, and other interested individuals). The idea is to join together to garden and shape the neighborhood, exchange ideas, host conferences on the topics of agricultural coordination, and to learn from one other. Furthermore, the initiative’s aim is to sustainably cultivate the green spaces of the university in order to provide vegetables and fruits to the students and the surrounding community. Essbarer Campus currently has around twelve active members.

The study sample consisted of thirteen participants, five from WirGarten and eight from Essbarer Campus. Initially, participants were recruited through online research of the groups, followed by correspondence through email. Interview participants were then identified through a snowball sampling approach. This method allowed for participants to identify other potential participants to gain targeted access to additional representatives (Bryan 2012). The study welcomed any participant who had been a part of the local food initiative within the past year. The participants represent a heterogenous group of individuals from a variety of professions, aging from 21 to 59.

Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews were chosen to provide greater understanding of local food initiatives’ perceptions and experience on specific topics related to sustainability values,

collective action and political perspectives (Newing 2011; Bryan 2012; Yin 2011). A semi-structured question guide was used to conduct the interviews (see Appendix A). As few studies exist regarding perceived experience in local food initiatives, a novel question guide was created using the aforementioned conceptual framework. The question guide consisted of sixteen main questions and a series of follow-up questions if the main questions were unclear. The question guide was pilot-tested for clarity among graduate student colleagues and adapted accordingly. Interviews were guided by the semi-structured question guide. However, additional questions were sometimes added to follow a thought-provoking topic and allow for conversation flow. Participants were encouraged to share their honest thoughts and opinions in an attempt to evoke greater understanding of the topics. As the study took place in Germany, interviews were conducted with individuals whose native language is German. Twelve interviews were conducted in English because the participants felt comfortable in the language. One interview was conducted in German with a translator present. Translation between researcher and participant occurred during the interview as needed. Each interview took between 45 and 90 minutes and was audio recorded. All participants signed consent forms prior to participation.

Data Analysis

A thematic content analysis was employed in order to identify, analyze, and report patterns within the data set (Braun and Clarke 2006). Interviews were transcribed verbatim, translating where necessary and proofread for accuracy, resulting in thirteen interview transcripts (see Appendix C). The interviews were then organized and coded using the qualitative data analysis software MAXQDA (Mayring 2000). The data was categorized into various codes and themes, both deductively and inductively. The initial data analysis took a deductive top-down approach based on the developed conceptual framework built off sustainable materialism. This allowed for the exploration of how local food initiatives think about themselves in relation to sustainability values, collective action and political perspectives. These themes were employed as a basis for coding the data, while still allowing for the development of inductive themes. Generating initial codes entailed coding interesting features and patterns across the data systematically, and collating data relevant to each code inductively. Next, the gathered codes were sorted in relation to the deductively developed themes or collated into new categories. All data within themes cohere together meaningfully, with clear and identifiable distinctions between each theme. Data coding was an iterative process to allow for restructuring and formulating codes and definitions as needed. In order to organize the findings, a codebook was created (see Appendix B) consisting of the code name, definition/description, rules, and an anchor example (Braun and Clarke 2006).

The data analysis resulted in thirteen codes, all of which could be categorized into the three themes of sustainability values, collective action and political perspectives. Appropriate quotes that convey the identified codes and themes were noted and have been incorporated in the following section.

Results

In this section, a summary of the thirteen developed codes within the three themes of sustainability values, collective action and political perspectives is provided. Direct quotes from participants followed by the initials of the initiative and fabricated numbers (to ensure anonymity) are shown.

Sustainability Values

Local food, nature connectedness and definition of “good food”

Evident in participant responses were sustainability values related to personal and group goals as well as action. The most frequent value mentioned was that of *local food* (e.g. regional and seasonal) with particular focus on the importance of knowledge regarding food origin. The subject of humans connecting to nature (*nature connectedness*) for food in a non-violent, harmonic way such as giving nature a voice, was also emphasized. Furthermore, when asked to describe “good food” many participants noted their preference for organic and ecologically sourced food, less packaging, and the significance of fair treatment for workers. Many participants also stressed the importance of sharing food with others.

"I would describe it [good food] as the person who grew it had a relation to it and knew the food. [...] And that the person knew that they didn't harm any other part of nature by growing the food and he does not only know it, but it's also the truth." (E.C. 6)

“In terms of sustainability and so on topics, I definitely would like to have most food organic and locally produced [...] I definitely like to have food in a community.” (E.C. 4)

Practical experience/experimentation

Practical experience/experimentation within both initiatives was viewed as a way to live out the previously mentioned sustainability values. Several participants described the group as an “experimental social project [...] or a real laboratory” (E.C. 11), with opportunities for hands-on experience in the garden. These statements were often linked to how participants felt connected to nature, thus appealing to their value of nature connectedness.

“It's kind of an experience thing to have this connection to food like that you can touch and do things with the hands, like a physical thing. [...] It's really kind of a cool thing that everyone has a different knowledge and we bring together that thing in our initiative.” (E.C. 12)

WirGarten members highlighted the use of bicycles as a means for environmentally friendly transportation of the harvested vegetables to a pick-up location, thus operating in line with their definition of “good food”. Both initiatives expressed the wish to incorporate sustainability values in a fully comprehensive way. The following quote demonstrates this particular ambitious attitude:

“And now they also have this like huge plastic tubes for growing the food faster which I also don't enjoy the idea because there's so much plastic that they say also from farms that is... when it somehow breaks sometime and then it just flies around and ends up in the nature and um yeah.

I would want the whole WirGarten system to be more ah more, *really* good. But, probably it is not possible on that kind of scale.” (W.G. 3)

All in all, participants from both initiatives expressed an unwavering desire to live more sustainably individually and collectively. Furthermore, gratitude for opportunity to learn through their group involvement in a practical and experiential manner was widespread.

Collective Action

Building coalitions

Expressed in both initiatives was the desire to build coalitions (*building coalitions*) with individuals and communities outside of the initiative. Collaboration with kindergartens, local farms, neighborhood communities, the university cafeteria and local supermarkets were noted (e.g. WirGarten vegetable pick-up hub).

“I also want to show people in here (the university) and coming from outside. [...] It’s at university but also for people in the neighborhood. And everyone coming together from all the directions.” (E.C. 11)

“They (WirGarten) [...] look at other farmers and build a network [...] Kindergartens will be invited, [...] and educational projects or implementation of a forest kindergarten there.” (W.G. 13)

Social connectivity

Participants emphasized their positive experience related to *social connectivity*, community, reciprocity and trust within the initiatives. Though work in the garden and initiative promotion was seen as the primary objective of the initiatives, socializing with one another in informal settings was also noted as important.

“I also like that the atmosphere is very informal and friendly. The way we talk with each other is on eye level. [...] You always feel that the others know what you’re doing, and they appreciate what you’re doing. [...] The whole dynamic is just very warm I guess.” (W.G. 5)

Initiative growth and impact

Inquiry into group goals led many participants to mention their wish for the initiative to grow in number of participants and land used for growing vegetables (*initiative growth and impact*). Positively influencing friends and family to adopt gardening or more sustainable behaviors (e.g. eating less meat) through speaking about their experience was also exhibited. General societal spin-off effects were also revealed related to inspiring other groups with their concept.

“And they (WirGarten) want to inspire people with the same kind of setup they can use their software, their ideas, their experience and then set up their own garden. So, I think it could have very big spin off effects.” (W.G. 7)

“I think it could be described as a grassroots initiative which tries to contribute their part to a bigger social-ecological transformation [...] And yeah, maybe this gives inspiration to other people to think about, oh that’s actually nice coming together and growing your own food.” (E.C. 11)

Initiative uniformity

Widely prevalent was the perception that the initiative is comprised of very like-minded people. Very often this like-mindedness was described as a ‘bubble’ connected to shared values and similar mindset. Many recognized that the group shares an identity and similar values, but that these values are not prevalent throughout society. These shared values were both expressed as an observation as well as a hinderance to potentially connecting or positively impacting others outside of the group. One participant even noted how the concern of the group regarding the environment could be seen as an “upper class problem,” (E.C. 8) further exasperating the ‘bubble’.

“I want to believe that we may do some changes in society, but I feel like the truth is we are very much in our bubble, both in our Essbarer Campus bubble where we are people who share a very similar mindset about food and sustainability [...] I also very strongly believe that that is also an upper-class problem kinda. We are, or I come from an environment where I’m privileged enough to actually have the resources to think about that sort of thing. And I know there’s enough people that don’t.” (E.C. 8)

Another example was mentioned regarding stigma around the university “bubble.” It was described as impeding the possibility for collaboration with farmers demonstrated in the quote below.

“The farmers say ‘okay it has a context with the university and things and that’s why I won’t come, yeah because they are just living in another space. And it’s not interesting for me to hear this.’ And yeah that’s why I think we contribute more to university because it’s a little difficult to involve the others from ‘real life.’” (E.C. 6)

Participation and commitment

While flexibility in terms of attending meetings and choosing the level of responsibility was often mentioned as positive, lack of *participation and commitment* was perceived by all as a major barrier for group success. Lack of motivation, time and vacations were reasons highlighted for lack of participation. This lack of commitment from others often led to some feeling overburdened with responsibility, sometimes resulting in individuals leaving the group.

“Whoever joins the WirGarten can say, ‘I can do this, or I can do that’ [...], or there is an email group of 30 people who I was able to write to whenever I needed someone helping me. But there were like three people that responded, and those three people didn’t always have time to help.” (W.G. 3)

“If it hadn’t been for me going (to the event), nobody would have been there and that would not have bothered anybody I think. Which I think is a bit scary because that is like the one day where you can actually show yourself and say, ‘hey, we exist.’” (E.C. 8)

Political Perspectives

Problem identification

Almost all of the participants expressed concern, frustration and/or distrust in the current conventional food system. This *problem identification* entailed critique of availability of

sustainable food options in addition to criticism of mainstream supermarket operations (e.g. excess packaging, large scale agriculture, animal welfare, environmental degradation, etc.). Criticism of power distribution in relation to workers' rights, company control and the globalization of food were also present.

“Probably most of the food we consume belongs to four or five companies and um... I don't believe that that's a good thing. I believe [...] that globalization isn't such a good thing because we, the western world, somehow kills or destroys land and by that also lives of people [...] by us making profit from their land.” (W.G. 3)

System reconfiguration

Following this critique, many participants offered suggestions for how the conventional food system might change, thus recommending a *system reconfiguration*. Participants suggested the need to change the general level of consciousness around regional food including greater emphasis on knowing where food comes from. Moreover, the wish for greater food sovereignty with a focus on people (compared to profit) was stressed. While many mentioned the value in individual action, the importance of acting within a cooperative frame to create greater power to change was underlined. Thus, many suggested that the work within their food initiative could be understood in line with their vision for changing the system.

“And I think these kinds of initiatives are very important, especially if you want to change. And I think we need lots of different kinds of systems to try and change this huge agricultural, conventional agricultural complex into something else. [...] I think it's really a lot of small steps like people gathering for new way of thinking, for a new consciousness for food, for how to deal with business.” (W.G. 2)

“This kind of having a garden is one way to be against something, and also come up with a different idea or, yeah trying to offer an alternative.” (E.C. 1)

Although participants identified a link between their individual and group actions, it was clear that the initiatives were not designed with a specific political agenda in mind nor was it a key discussion point within the group.

“I think everybody has their political standpoint from which they're trying to agree. But the differences haven't been discussed, to reach a consensus or yeah, agree on a point that the whole group shares.” (E.C. 1)

Bureaucratic hurdles

Numerous comments reflected frustration with various *bureaucratic hurdles*. WirGarten members revealed difficulties around complicated regulations and laws necessary for becoming an official food cooperative. Essbarer Campus members noted similar concerns related to university administrative barriers and time delays.

“One big struggle is like fulfilling all the regulations we are confronted with. [...] Why is it that complicated? You just wanted to grow vegetables... but we have to fulfill thousands of contracts and laws and signing papers. ” (W.G. 2)

“I think there’s formal restrictions to the group. I know [...] they wrote a plan to transform kind of the campus to an edible campus. But I mean, there’s people from the university who plan all this, so I guess they have contrary ideals of a manageable campus.” (E.C. 11)

Initiative power structure

Discussions centered on the *initiative’s power structure* clearly reflected participant’s perspectives regarding the need for equal distribution of power within any system. Ess-barer Campus participants stated that group consensus amongst all members must be achieved for all decisions taken. Voting democratically was noted as the main decision-making approach for WirGarten, justified by the large number of members. While various responsibilities within each group were mentioned (e.g. communications manager, logistics specialist, etc.), it was emphasized that no apparent hierarchy between positions exists. Initiative responsibilities were described as open to all and dependent on the amount members would like to be involved.

“We try to just look on the agenda, okay what shall we do and yeah we have the [...] consensus. Yeah, we want to take our decisions in a consensus way.” (E.C. 6)

“I think it’s really important to have a self-organized and self-responsive organizational structure so that we don’t have like conventional hierarchy structures... so that people can really become responsible for their own part of the company and not be controlled or like, um yeah so that they can unleash their personal potential to really get involved.” (W.G. 2)

Discussion

This research set out to explore how participants in local food initiatives think about their experience in relation to the following dimensions: sustainability values, collective action and political perspectives. In this section, the findings from the interviews will first be discussed in relation to the conceptual framework's dimensions. This includes a summary of the findings in relation to each dimension, a comparison of the findings with previous research, accompanied by a discussion regarding how the findings may raise new issues and be applied more generally. Lastly, the conceptual framework's analytical value in relation to a broader research context will be considered, followed by several study limitations.

Sustainability Values

As local food initiatives have historically been found to express values centered on sustainability (Feenstra 2002; Laforge et al. 2017; Pratt 2007), it was not unexpected that participants conveyed values focused on care for the environment, organic standards, and fair treatment for workers. In particular, knowledge of food origin and connecting to nature stood out as the most prevalent value, thus congruent with the findings of Renting et al. (2003). Additionally, ability for participants to live and act in accordance with their values through practical action and experience, was perceived as a major benefit to group involvement. This relates to Schlosberg and Cole's (2015) argument that local food movements focus on *action* that supports the connection between humans and the non-human realm. Considering this, these local food initiatives may be operating in line with Feagan's (2007) concept of ecological rationale. This concept calls for the realignment between "nature, quality, region and local, producers and consumers" in local food systems (Feagan 2007, p. 26). These findings suggest that local food initiatives may serve as a promising platform of engagement for individuals motivated by sustainability values, which may provide a framework for practical experimentation centered on locally produced food.

Interestingly, when participants were asked about their values regarding food, twelve out of the thirteen shared unsolicited past experiences regarding their motivation to join the food initiative. This included previous experience in sustainability related activities including how they were raised, past volunteer experiences, and/or exposure to gardening and farming earlier in life. This finding indicates that past experience may be influential in motivating individuals to join local food initiatives. Considering this, there may be value in exposing individuals at a young age to garden-related projects, or volunteer opportunities related to sustainability as they may strengthen the development of local food initiatives.

Collective Action

Findings indicate that local food initiatives foster healthy social relationships and cooperation, thus supporting the work of Feenstra (1997). Although the goal to grow in size and scale was expressed by both initiatives, a lack of participation and commitment was

pervasive. Surprisingly, this was exhibited in the large group of 300 members in WirGarten, and in the small one of twelve members in Essbarer Campus. These findings relate to Hassainein's (2003) argument that outcomes of collective action are not always assured or predictable. It raises the question of the long-term sustainability of these local food initiatives.

Moreover, both initiatives noted the desire to involve others (e.g. individuals and various groups) outside of their group, while at the same time alluding to the sustainability/local food 'bubble' they believe they reside in. The previous discussion regarding how almost all of the participants were exposed to sustainability related activities in the past (e.g. childhood farms, volunteering, etc.) highlights one example of the type of 'bubble' the group may consist of. This could be interpreted as a kind of self-selected social exclusiveness, despite it being unintentional. This correlates with research regarding how local food initiatives may not be accessible for all, instead directed toward local elites (DuPuis and Good 2005; Born and Purcell 2006). Hinrichs and Kremer (2002) discuss this, positing that local food systems tend to be homogenized and exclusionary, with members who are often white, middle-class individuals. These findings reveal an apparent clash between initiative goals (e.g. growing as an initiative and desire for others to join) and how the group perceives itself (e.g. lack of commitment and 'bubble').

Political Perspectives

The findings that local food participants crave a degree of control and transparency in food consumption is in line with the work of DuPuis and Goodman (2005). Additionally, the findings that participants perceive their values around food to be in opposition to the industrial, capitalist food system closely relates to the work of Schlosberg and Cole (2015), and Papaoikonomou and Gineise (2017). Similar to what Schlosberg and Cole (2015) have already reported, the participants interviewed in this study were keenly self-aware of their own political motivations and how the group's actions may relate to politics (e.g. democratic and consensus voting in initiative). However, they did not describe their initiatives as having a specific political agenda to any degree. In fact, one participant mentioned that the initiative had never mentioned or discussed the political perspectives in the group. Considering this, it could be argued that neither of these local food initiatives operate within what Schlosberg and Cole (2015) call 'radical democracy' in food groups (Schlosberg and Cole 2015, p. 1). Although participants expressed frustration with political hurdles the initiative faced, in the end they complied, possibly indicating the lack of 'radical' action which has been argued to exist in other social movements. These findings demonstrate an intriguing relationship between participant's strong political identity and lack of distinct political action. The reasons behind this are unclear from this study. Further research regarding this finding in relation to group uniformity (previously discussed topic) could be a first step in researching this phenomenon.

Discussion of Conceptual Framework

Employing a conceptual framework to real-world settings provides a structure when exploring various motivations, goals and values that exist within these local food initiatives. In comparison to biographical or narrative approaches which focus primarily on individual accounts of life experience and the meanings they attach to them (Roberts 2002), this framework also considers the impact of these meanings on wider social contexts. This is the case as the three dimensions chosen for the framework are indicated in literature as the most prominent aspects of local food initiative participants experience (e.g. sustainability values, collective action, and political perspectives). Notably, all data collected fit to the deductive themes of sustainability values, collective action and political perspectives. The lack of outliers in the data set may be suggestive of two things. First, it suggests that this conceptual framework may provide a useful lens for interpreting themes across seemingly contrasting initiatives. This is the case as sustainable materialism was created to describe an array of environmental activism groups, thus potentially serving as a starting point for thinking about what these local food initiatives have in common with other social initiatives. Second, it indicates potential blind spots regarding objectivity in this study. As the data collection and analysis was approached with this framework initially in mind, there may have been subjective bias. Additionally, this framework focuses more on the social and ecological dimensions of sustainability, in turn neglecting the economic dimension. This may limit the potential for transferability for initiatives centered around economics. Therefore, this frame could be extended with this fourth dimension in order to investigate the relevance of the economic dimension. Moreover, this framework does not explicitly explain how the dimensions operate with one another which could be useful in research focused on understanding the relationship between the micro, meso and macro level. Finally, another limitation worth noting is the coding process. Although the data set was coded in several rounds, this was completed by only one researcher. Thus, in order to ensure validity of the codes and themes, inter-coder reliability involving other researchers is recommended (Mayring 2000).

Conclusion and Outlook

This research provides important insight into how participants in local food initiatives think about their experience in relation to sustainability values, collective action and political perspectives. Although some of the findings are consistent with previous research such as participants exhibiting strong sustainability values (e.g. care for the environment, knowledge of food origin, connection to nature, etc.) and enjoyment of the collective nature of the initiatives, other outcomes showed a degree of complexity and novelty. This was illustrated in both cases in the clash between the goals of the initiatives and the perception of certain characteristics of the initiatives. This included the wish for the initiative to grow, despite a lack of participation and commitment. Similarly, this was also seen in the wish for the initiatives to involve a diverse range of participants, while simultaneously acknowledging the sustainability ‘bubble’ the participants reside in. Moreover, complexity around political perspectives was demonstrated, thus suggesting that there may not be a ‘one size fits all’ concerning initiative’s political perspectives. This was highlighted by the fact that many participants expressed political motivation and even perceived group actions as counter to the mainstream food system, although both initiatives did not identify as a politically motivated.

By conducting empirical research linking the idiosyncrasies of local food initiatives noted in research with a broader theoretical framework, a better understanding of how local food initiatives characterize their experience in relation to specific dimensions was achieved. This research revealed various values and goals, ultimately shedding light on potential opportunities and barriers for initiative success, important for several reasons. First, knowledge regarding how opportunities and barriers play out may be important in helping grassroots movements create effective strategies for achieving more sustainable and just food systems. Second, it may serve as a starting framework for researchers to explore commonalities and differences of other social movements aimed towards sustainability transitions. To facilitate greater understanding and the longevity of local food initiatives, future research focusing on approaches to overcome barriers and strengthen opportunities may prove fruitful. This could include research into how an individual’s motivation may translate into long-lasting group participation, in addition to how initiatives may be more inclusive for those outside of the initiative. Research related to these topics could provide necessary and helpful insights for furthering the agenda of local food initiatives.

Acknowledgments: I would like to thank the participants of the study for making the research possible, my academic advisors Prof. Dr. Daniel Fischer, Prof. Dr. Christopher Wharton and Prof. Dr. Henrik von Wehrden who provided constructive feedback and helped structure the research, and PhD student Karoline Pöggel for inspiring the initial phase of research.

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Appendix

Appendix A – Interview Guide

| Key | |
|---------------------------------|---|
| Italicized questions | Main question |
| Non-italicized questions | Follow-up questions (if main was unclear) |

| Sustainability Values | Collective Action | Political Perspectives |
|--|---|--|
| <p><i>How would you describe a typical day for you in relation to food?</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Where do you get your food (e.g. supermarkets, markets, garden)? - Do you cook alone or with others? | <p><i>Have you been a part of any community group in the past besides the one you are in now?</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <i>What group/why were you involved?</i> | <p><i>How would you describe what you do in relation to society at large?</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Do you think there is a political dimension of food? |
| <p><i>What ideas are important to you regarding your food choices?</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - What are you aware of when you purchase and consume food? | <p><i>How would you describe your group to someone curious about what you are doing?</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Have you received any interesting reactions? | <p><i>How would you describe what your group does in relation to society at large?</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Does your group ever speak about politics? |
| <p><i>How would you describe “good food”?</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - What is important to you regarding food? | <p><i>How would you describe a typical group meeting?</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - How does the group organize itself? | |
| <p><i>You mentioned that you value _____ when it comes to food. Is there is anything that prevents you from buying/eating this way?</i></p> | <p><i>Can you tell me the story of how you became involved in the local food group?</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <i>What is your role in the group?</i> - <i>What motivated you to join this group?</i> | |
| <p><i>What is important for the group?</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - What ideas does the group share and what do most people agree on? | <p><i>How do you think being part of this group has influenced your perspective on food?</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Any positive or negative implications? | |
| <p><i>How would you describe your experience with the group?</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Have any of your habits (i.e. food consumption, activism, perspectives, etc.) evolved or changed since joining the group? | <p><i>Are there any opportunities for the group to grow/is this something that the group desires?</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Why does (or doesn't) the group want to grow? | |

Appendix B – Codebook

| Theme | Code | Definition/description | Rules | Anchor example |
|-----------------------|--------------------------------------|---|--|--|
| Sustainability Values | Local food | Discussion of local (i.e. regional) and seasonal food | Including: 1) Discussion of local food and seasonality (i.e. regional, food miles, food origin etc.) 2) Value of individual and group Excluding: 1) Specific reference to connection to nature | "We definitely have shared values about that, about eating locally, knowing where your food comes from" (W.G. 7). |
| | Nature connectedness | Description of the group or individual's perspective regarding the connection between food and nature | Including: 1) Specific mention of nature 2) Description of the individual or group value of connection to nature including the needs and limits of nature | "Yeah, I would describe it (good food) as that the person who grew it had a relation to it and knew the food. [...] That the person knew that they didn't harm any other part of nature by growing the food and he does not only know it, but it's also the truth." (E.C. 6) |
| | "Good food" | Description of what "good food" means to the participant | Including: 1) Description of specific qualities participant identifies as "good" (i.e. organic quality, taste, durability, food sharing, buying from the market, fair treatment of farmers, quality of production standards) Excluding: 1) 'Food/nature connection' category 2) Other people's perspectives on "good food" | "It (the initiative) is based on values of organic food, regional, seasonal food, it's based on the basic line of sustainability, [...] we try like of course having no packaging." (W.G. 2) |
| | Practical experience/experimentation | Description of the group serving as a platform to learning through practical experience and experimentation | Including: 1) Naming opportunities for hands-on experience with group tasks 2) Describing knowledge exchange within the group Excluding: 1) General description of how the group functions (i.e. initiative structure) | "The common ground is that all of the people that are interested in the group like to do something practical outside. [...] But that is the main thing, that you are outside and do something with the earth and the plants" (E.C. 4) |

| Theme | Code | Definition/description | Rules | Anchor example |
|-------------------|------------------------------|--|---|---|
| Collective Action | Building coalitions | Description of the different types of people/organizations that are involved with the initiative | Including: 1)Discussion of collaborations that the group has with other groups 2)Expressing wish to have more collaboration with others 3)Discussion of engagement activities | "So we also want to invite the people near the university, or just in Lüneburg, just who wants to join us." (E.C. 6) |
| | Social connectivity | Highlighting the sense of community participants feel through participation | Including: 1)Mention of the connections participants have with one another by recalling attributes such as trust, reciprocity, positive atmosphere, etc. 2)Discussion of social events outside of general group meeting | It's not just the food, but actually meeting the people and having a group of people that think similar [...] Yeah, I think it's both connecting food with community kind of thing, yeah." (W.G. 5) |
| | Initiative uniformity | Description of participants being very similar in certain ways, residing in a specific social bubble | Including 1)Specifically naming an existing "bubble" in relation to values 2)Describing how groups of people have similar values (could be including themselves) 3)Description (and often critique) of participant or group bubble in relation to how others outside group think about similar topics | "I want to believe that we may do some changes in society, but I feel like the truth is we are very much in our bubble, both in our Essbarer Campus bubble where we are people who share a very similar mindset about food and sustainability." (W.G. 8) |
| | Participation and commitment | Discussion around lack of participant commitment and participation | Including: 1)Reasons why group or individual involvement is lacking (i.e. time constraints, burnout, graduating, the way society is structured etc.) 2)Discussion of the lack of people participating | "If it hadn't been for me going (to the tabling), nobody would have been there and that would not have bothered anybody I think. Which I think is a bit scary because that is like the one day where you can actually show yourself and say, 'hey, we exist.'" (E.C. 8) |
| | Initiative growth and impact | Description of the initiative's wish to grow/expand | Including: 1)Discussing the desire for the initiative to expand in scale and grow in terms of the number of members 2)Discussion of what growth/expansion might mean for group 3)Perceived impact on society | They (E.C.) are also giving something into society in the form of ideas and inputs about ways things could work. And yeah maybe this gives inspiration to other people to think about, oh that's actually nice coming together and growing your own food." (E.C., 11) |

| Theme | Code | Definition/description | Rules | Anchor example |
|------------------------|----------------------------|---|--|---|
| Political Perspectives | Problem Identification | Describing problematic issues within the current food system | Including: 1)Noting issues or problems the individual or group perceives within current food system 2)Description of options (or lack thereof) within the current food system 3)Critiquing the mainstream, industrial food system | "I think that the economy design like today, it will not succeed in this design because it's not a long term. It's not sustainable for people, planet... even for profit, it's not sustainable" (W.G. 2) |
| | System re-configuration | Recommendations regarding how the participant/group believes the conventional food system should be changed | Including: 1)Offering solutions to how the food system should be structured (i.e. food sovereignty, independence, increased local emphasis, etc.) 2)Discussing initiative as part of the solution to the problem | "It is about the political side of it. [...] This kind of having a garden is one way to be against something, and also come up with a different idea, or yeah, trying to offer an alternative. (E.C. 1) |
| | Initiative Power Structure | Discussion regarding the initiative's structure | Including: 1)Discussion of power dynamics, individual roles, responsibilities, and decision making processes 2)Mention of specific type of initiative structure related to the above point (e.g. hierarchy, consensus, etc.) 3)Expression of frustration related to initiative structure | "I think it's really important to have a self-organized and self-responsible organizational structure so that we don't have like conventional hierarchy structures... so that people can really become responsible for their own part of the company." (W.G. 2) |
| | Bureaucratic hurdles | Description of bureaucratic/administrative obstacles the initiative experiences | Including: 1) Naming restrictions/barriers that the group faces (i.e. university regulations, city zoning, etc.) 2) Lack of action due to administrative obstacles | "Also, one big struggle is like fulfilling all the regulations we are confronted with. [...] why is it that complicated? You just wanted to grow vegetables... but we have to fulfill thousands of contracts and laws and signing papers. " (W.G. 2) |

Appendix C – Interview Transcripts

The interview transcripts can be found on the attached CD.

Declaration of own work / Erklärung der Selbstständigkeit

„Ich versichere, dass ich diese Master-Arbeit – bei einer Gruppenarbeit den entsprechend gekennzeichneten Teil der Master-Arbeit – selbstständig verfasst und keine anderen als die angegebenen Quellen und Hilfsmittel benutzt habe. Ich versichere, alle Stellen der Arbeit, die wortwörtlich oder sinngemäß aus anderen Quellen übernommen wurden, als solche kenntlich gemacht und die Arbeit in gleicher oder ähnlicher Form noch keiner Prüfungsbehörde vorgelegt zu haben.“

Lüneburg, den 29.06.2018

Hannah Trigg