

CONSUMING COMMUNITY: AN ETHNOGRAPHY OF A CENTRAL TEXAS  
COMMUNITY SUPPORTED AGRICULTURE PROGRAM

by

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## **ABSTRACT**

Food is the common denominator across humanity. The industrialization of agriculture has allowed year-round growing and the global distribution of produce. The alternative food movement rejects this industrialization. One subset of alternative food are community supported agriculture (CSA) programs which provide food to those who purchase shares in advance. Much of the research on CSA programs has been conducted in the northeastern and west coast areas of the United States and primarily focuses on the motivations behind participation. Little attention has been paid to CSA programs in Texas.

To fill this gap in the literature, the following ethnography was conducted on a CSA program in central Texas. Using symbolic interactionist theory as a framework, this study describes the culture and community formed within the CSA program during the Fall 2018 cycle. The main cultural themes identified were *Opposition, Education, Personal Connection, and Community*.



## **CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION**

The agricultural industry not only provides the world's food but is also a source of employment and community for those involved. As one of the oldest industries, it has experienced a great deal of growth, consolidation, and corporatization in the past 100 years thanks to genetic engineering and technological advancements. The conventional food system, which is the industry that grows, processes, and sells the majority of commercially available food in developed nations, consists of grocery stores, supermarkets, industrial scale agriculture systems, and globalized food production. In contrast, the alternative food movement calls for obtaining food through alternative food systems such as local farms, urban gardens, and other small-scale agriculturalists to reject the conventional food system.

The alternative food movement and alternative food systems are sociologically important due to their limited nature and conscious participation. The limits of alternative food systems are due to their focus on small scale food production which may only service a set number of individuals. Members of the alternative food movement must selectively purchase food outside of the conventional food system which requires additional time and effort. The Cooperative Agriculture (Co-Op) system and Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) programs do not adhere to the industrialized food system and are often accompanied by ideology and culture that promotes opting out of the mass food system. Co-Ops are groups of individual farms that form a collective to pool their resources for increased purchasing power and name recognition at local

markets. CSA programs are subscription based plans where consumers receive a share of the harvest in exchange for the payment made at the beginning of a season. By researching a local Co-Op and their CSA program, we can better understand how this innovative organization, as well as its distinctive culture, have evolved. This study will contribute to the sociological literature on consumerism, food ways, and community.

The Co-Op and accompanying CSA program bring together a group of people for an economic exchange of goods. The underlying ideology of the alternative food movement combined with the offering of additional events by the Co-Op members suggest there is an attempt at building a community and culture among the program participants and Co-Op members. Since the Co-Op offers additional events for CSA participants and because CSA programs and farming Co-Ops are part of the alternative food movement, an attempt at building a community and culture among participants and farmers appears to have been made. The purpose of this study is to investigate whether a community and culture have formed within a Central Texas CSA program among Co-Op members and CSA participants.

Food is a life source and the common denominator in every culture. People have procured and prepared their food various ways throughout history. Traditionally, they would eat local seasonal foods (Portman 2014). Food is a tool for expressing care, status, identity, and community (Portman 2014; Shrank & Running 2018). Food preparation at home has been a female gendered activity with women using food to assert their authority. Portman (2014) found that

women maintained a position of maternal authority as they selected and prepared much of their household's consumed food. With the development of food processing and agriculture technologies, the food consumed by the industrialized world has shifted from seasonal and local to year-round variety and globally transported (Pollan 2006). This industrialized food system is now the conventional food system.

In the U.S., farms participating in the conventional food system produce on an industrial scale, use researched and patented crops, and often partner with corporations to meet product demands (Pollan 2006). Current food policies encourage farmers to produce as much as possible using genetically modified organisms and fertilizers which increases production and drives food prices down (Pollan 2006, Zerbe 2010).

As farmers participate in industrial agriculture, they begin losing pre-industrial agricultural knowledge that previously was shared among communities. This loss produces farmers who are less likely to be invested in their community as the need for communal knowledge decreases (Iles & Marsh 2012; Farley & Bush 2016). Additionally, subsidies and the use of pollutants to increase food production keep supermarket food prices low (Schneider 2008). The cost of food production would be much higher without the government subsidies and the use of polluting chemicals. This results in consumers being unaware of the real costs of food production. Since the food system is globalized, food scares like Mad Cow disease and lettuce recalls in which people disposed of and avoided

possibly contaminated goods now have an international impact (Iles & Marsh 2012; Zerbe 2010).

### *Alternative Food Movement*

Alternative food movements have seen increased popularity and interest in the past two decades. The overarching ideology is to source food outside of the conventional food system. This can be manifested in urban gardening, homesteading, organic farming, and locavorism.

Locavorism, the selective consumption of food grown and produced within one's geographic region, is a subset of the alternative food movement. For the environmentally conscious, choosing a local farmer reflects that they are making a conscious effort to reduce the environmental impact of their diet, for example, since their food is not shipped using fossil fuels (Pollan 2006). Additionally, as organic practices have become popular, small farmers have capitalized on consumer desires by switching from industrial agriculture towards chemical free practices (Kleiman 2009; Brehm & Eisenhauer 2008). Due to the smaller scale of non-industrialized agriculture, the amount of market share achieved by alternative agricultural methods is not easily determined. While some producers would attempt to sell their products and therefore have their participation measured, for those who grow small gardens or trade goods among friends, there is currently no way to measure their economic impact and the impact of the movement as a whole (Zerbe 2010).

## **CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW**

Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) is a focus of economic, geographic, and sociological study as it relates to economic consumption, the regionality of CSAs, and the social connection between farmers and consumers. The geographer Schnell (2007) stated that the idea of community supported agriculture programs began in Japan during the 1960s as unsatisfied consumers started contracting directly with farmers. This idea spread to America in the mid-1980s. Although CSAs currently take many forms, they are most often partnerships between consumers and local farmers where a share is bought at the beginning of a season and weekly bundles of produce are given in exchange. With their increased popularity, some CSAs now offer additional goods such as meat, eggs, and dairy (Schnell 2007, Andreatta & Wickliffe 2002). Due to the intentionally small size of CSA programs, CSA programs are adapted to best serve the farmers and communities they exist in while following the basic CSA model.

Cone and Myhre (2000) offered a history of the evolution of CSA programs from a sociological perspective. In the mid-1980s, the first CSA in the United States opened in Massachusetts and primarily focused on vegetables. Schnell (2007) stated from there, CSAs began spreading throughout the country with vegetable CSAs being the most common. CSAs are often located near “large metropolitan cities” (Schnell 2007: 555). Additionally, Schnell found when analyzing CSA participant demographics, higher education was a common factor

suggesting that as education increases, so does concern about food production. This could also be the result of higher paying jobs which result in more discretionary income to devote to a food budget and the increased ability to pay for a CSA share.

Some criticism of locavorism from food justice activists stems from the mistreatment of migrant workers by farm managers. Food justice activists are primarily concerned with a lack of social equity in food availability as it relates to systemic oppression and fall within the sociological discipline. The food justice activist Gray (2014) asserted that when locavores do not research employment practices of farms, the farmers have room to employ and abuse migrant workers although not all farmers do this. Gray's (2014) examples of migrant worker abuse include poor housing conditions, high product quotas, and threats of terminating employment when breaks, sick leave, and pay increases are requested. As migrant farmworkers have little personal ability to combat mistreatment, responsibility is placed upon consumers to research the farm employment practices to combat this criticism of locavorism. CSA programs offer an easy method of buying local produce since they typically have a pickup or delivery system in place that benefits both farmers and consumers. Mittal (2004) is another sociologist concerned with race and poverty. He stated that CSA programs directly drives sales for small farmers while restoring the damaged community ties and agriculture knowledge caused by corporate agribusiness (2004). As an extension of the locavore movement, CSAs provides ease of access to local agricultural products while fostering connections to the farmers

which allows the consumers to inquire after employment and sustainable growing practices.

There are several noteworthy critiques of CSAs by food justice activists. Schnell (2007) found the participation demographics reveal that lower class individuals are often unable to afford the higher prices or purchase a share in one lump sum. Sociologists Brehm and Eisenhauer (2008) asserted that, in some locations, this has been addressed through the implementation of farmers markets and CSAs that work with food assistance programs and non-profit organizations. The requirement of cash in advance prohibits many others who, though they have the capital to participate, do not want to take on the risks associated with a CSA; if there is a crop failure or devastating weather, their money buys them less if anything at all.

According to economists Warzecha and Shin (2008), locavores believe that local food should be grown sustainably, without chemicals, or else it is the same as sustainably grown non-local food. Another critique is the lack of variety and seasonality of local crops. Furthermore, Warzecha and Shin (2008) discovered that only a select subset of locavores and CSA participants interpret eating locally to mean eating exclusively locally grown foods, however most within the movement source locally as much as possible while supplementing with non-local foods. Additionally, Schnell (2007) suggested that political ideology could be an impediment as conservative areas seem to have fewer CSAs, although this could be a spurious correlation.

Whereas the volume of sales to individuals in CSAs is lower than to grocers and wholesalers in industrial agriculture, the money from sales goes directly to the farmer. This allows farmers to earn more from their crops while ensuring some protection from economic hardship if a harvest does poorly or fails (Schnell 2007). Maxey (2006) found having crops that are guaranteed to be sold addresses concerns of competing with supermarkets and provides capital for the CSA farms to pay mandatory regulatory fees that are comparatively miniscule for their industrial-scale counterparts.

Farmers who operate small farms view their agricultural methods “as a way of life as well as a business” (Andreatta & Wickliffe 2002: 172). Sociologists Andreatta and Wickliffe discovered that CSA farmers view CSAs as insurance of crop sales and reduced transportation costs. This means that CSA programs reduce the stress of sales and the time needed to sell the same amount of goods which can allow the farmers to focus on growing more food, improve their techniques, and expand their businesses.

As previously mentioned in the introduction, food is both a method of care and expression of identity. Those willing and able to purchase costlier food are often attempting to demonstrate both their care for others and their status. Shrank and Running (2018) focused on consumer culture that drives participation because of health, taste, and ethics. In terms of health, CSA food was used to demonstrate care. In fact during the evolution of CSAs, Cone and Myhre (2000) found women were often the driving force behind household participation in the



programs. Satisfaction was expressed at eating food like “Grandma cook[ed],” which shows that while opting out of the conventional food system, consumers were reinforcing traditional gender roles through female food procurement (Portman 2014: 11). Although women were often the driving force behind initial participation in CSAs, the research on CSA evolution discovered once a household had joined, there was close to equal participation in events across genders (Cone & Myhre 2000).

### *Gaps in the Literature*

The most pervasive issue for scholars across disciplines studying foodways and consumption is that much of the research is over eight years old. CSA programs fed over 180,000 households in 2012 showing remarkable growth since their introduction in the 1980’s which began with a singular CSA program that fed around 25 households (Iles & Marsh 2012). The research on CSA programs has not kept up with the growth in participation. Additionally, much of the research has neglected to follow both the alternative food movement and CSA programs in Texas. This gap is significant due to the large amount of land devoted to agricultural use in Texas.

Another deficiency of much of the current sociological literature is the selection of either the farmers or consumers as the focus. Andreatta and Wickliffe (2002) studied the consumer motivations for purchasing a CSA share while studies conducted by Maxey and Farley and Bush focused on farmer ethics. In focusing on one side, interactions between the two groups are ignored.

What remains to be seen are the interactions between the two sides and whether there is the formation of culture and community. It is important to view these interactions as all group members are opting out of the conventional food system.

As previously mentioned, the current literature on the development of CSA programs is dated. Therefore, many of the foundational studies that investigated CSAs were conducted prior to the proliferation of social media. I examined the role that social media plays in the culture of the community.

This study contributes to the literature on the alternative food movement and CSA programs by providing an ethnography of a CSA in Texas. The unique aspects of the studied CSA program and how it relates to the development of the community was explored. This highlights the community formed between the shareholders and farmers through their chosen method of meeting: at weekly food pickups and during additional events. The following study focuses on the unique community and cultural development surrounding a new alternative to mass agriculture: the local farming cooperative (Co-Op) and a community supported agriculture (CSA) program in central Texas.

### CHAPTER III: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

According to Prus (1996:10), Symbolic Interaction is “the study of the ways in which people make sense of their life-situations and the ways in which they go about their activities” in relation to others. Life consists of a series of cooperative interactions where individuals constantly adjust and affiliate themselves with others. Through interactions, *communal knowledge*, which is information that is gathered or discovered, is shared which further socializes society members. Humans are social beings who form communities and groups. As communities form, popular dominant groups become the norm while less popular groups are considered alternative.

Within ideological movements like the alternative food movement, groups and organizations that focus on special issues form *small groups* (Fine 2012). These small groups are formed by interactions and associations of people who regularly come into contact with each other and are influenced by *local context*, the “set of shared understandings” from an area (Fine 2012: 161). When looking at small groups, it is important to focus on the social bonds therein. As discussed in the literature review, CSA programs are based on a non-traditional payment structure and rely heavily on quality goods, personal interactions, and commitment to alternative food ideology to retain participants and advertise to potential customers. Additionally, they are kept to a small number of subscribers due to the constraints of small-scale agricultural production. This non-traditional structure encourages consumers to purchase locally grown food directly from

farmers as opposed to the conventional food system which has intermediaries between the grower and consumer. The present study will investigate a number of features in symbolic interactionist thought as they apply to CSA programs.

### *Symbolic Interaction and CSA Programs*

As Fine (2012) argued, small groups operate at a local level and are a source of social capital and *identity*. Identity is the chosen presentation of self through actions and characteristics which is created in relation to socio-cultural structures and other people (Goffman 1959). One person may have multiple identities that correspond with their membership in different groups. As group members interact and become invested in each other, they negotiate meanings and norms within the group (Fine 2012). Fine (2012) also argued that *local culture*, or the influence of local context on cultural development, assist in encouraging commitment to and reinforce the boundaries of small groups by demonstrating the uniqueness of the groups. With CSAs, this means that the alternative food movement provides a base ideology for guidance while the members create a unique culture reflective of the geographic area. As CSA programs vary in terms of location, the number of contributing farms, and participation numbers, the cultures of these tiny publics have individuality; no two CSAs are exactly alike. With each CSA, this creates a culture that has shared commonalities while remaining unique which can be observed by members and outsiders (Fine 2012). The present study is a case study that focuses on one particular CSA.

According to Fine (2012), local groups form local connections that may provide *networks* of learning and social interaction. Similar to how “often [larger movements] are organized through interlocking groups, cells, or chapters,” that are unique at the local level, individual CSAs bring together people of different backgrounds located close to each other who have the similar goal of supporting local alternative agriculture (Fine 2012: 165). By providing a local network, CSAs offer a place for members to learn and experience other local issues through their relationships with other members. Additionally, participants may learn new information about the ecosystem of their region from the farmers and the food they receive which enriches their understanding of the area. Because CSAs are location based, members may become deeply invested into the group ideology through prolonged participation. By participating and interacting in a CSA, the group culture is shaped and reinforced.

Goffman has noted that the concept of *fronts* is important to understanding interaction. Fronts include the setting and equipment required in addition to self-presentation (Goffman 1959). Interactions require constant self-adjustment; this includes physical displays like facial expressions and verbal responses (McPhail 2006). Instead crafting a new front for every interaction, people can recognize a setting and select a familiar front accordingly. Some fronts become universal; very few situations require new fronts that are unknown to adults (Goffman 1959). In this study, I will examine the strategies used by CSA members to establish and implement organizational fronts for social interaction.

Using symbolic interaction as my theoretical framework, I conducted a study on a CSA program in central Texas to determine the role such interactions play in the development of community. With guiding principles from the alternative food movement and regular contact, a culture unique to this CSA will have formed within the group. This study will focus on the distinctions between the local culture of the studied CSA and CSA programs in general. The purpose of this research is to provide a depiction of this unique culture and the accompanying values and beliefs.

## **CHAPTER IV: METHODOLOGY**

To produce a detailed ethnography of the CSA program, I conducted observations and interviews. These in-depth interviews collected the thoughts and reflections of community members who acted as expert witnesses. Additionally, interviews introduced, clarified and verified activities I observed. All those named in this research have their names changed to protect their identities. The observational research provided information on group interactions and structure and allowed participants to become accustomed to my presence. By pairing interviews and observations, an ethnography that portrays the culture and community of the CSA program was made more detailed than using either method alone.

First, I completed an executive interview with the key informant, the Co-Op Board President. An executive interview provides an “official” perception and standpoint of the group that can also serve as a portal to other aspects and members of the group (Kotarba 2014). The Board President is a highly involved woman who holds a full-time career in addition to her work with the Co-Op. In addition to this, she advocates for community engagement and has a family with young children. This made it difficult to find time to meet with her so, at her convenience, I conducted the interview at a CSA related event. The executive interview was major factor in gaining access to the Co-Op as the president of the board had the ultimate say in permitting research. This interview followed a semi-structured format to allow for researcher reflexivity in response to personal

reactions and to permit clarification (Berg & Lune 2012). In addition to the standard interview guide listed below, the President gave a brief history of the organization and referred me to the Co-Op website for specific dates and formal guidelines of farmer participation.

The in-depth interviews (n = 19) were conducted at the convenience of willing farmers, Co-Op members, and CSA participants. Every in-depth interview was conducted at the weekly food pickup upon the request of the respondents. The in-depth interviews with farmer members and CSA participants followed a semi-structured interview format. Semi-structured interviews contain baseline questions that were reworded and supplemented with follow up questions. These interviews remained brief and were conducted with the consent of the interviewees. None of the respondents permitted themselves to be recorded so I developed a shorthand of commonly used words over the course of the first three interviews to better document the full interviews. By utilizing the semi-structured interview format, I was able to blend in with and mirror the interviewees thereby gaining more thoughtful responses (Berg & Lune 2012).

The interview questions focused on group values and participation. Additionally, factors concerning retention were addressed to provide a picture of group culture and satisfaction. Community building and social aspects of the group were important portions of the interview as well. Finally, the most open-ended section of the interviews is the ancillary benefits section which intended to elicit unstructured commentary. The interviewees were asked to provide their own explanation of their involvement in the community.



The interview guide follows:

1. When and why did you first join this community?
2. What did you anticipate when joining? What have you received or achieved since?
3. What are the actual activities that you engage in?
4. How does your membership relate to your personal values? How does your involvement impact your everyday life?
5. What are the group's values? How the do the farming practices relate to group values?
6. How do the group's values influence what decisions are made and activities are held?
7. Do you feel that the additional events and group social media presence have played a part in your involvement? If so, how?
8. Tell me in your own words what it feels like to be a member of this community.

The interview questions often elicited responses that covered other sections of the interview guide. I probed for examples during the interviews when they were not initially offered. Although the interviews were intended to be brief, some respondents asked to extend the interview so they could speak more on their perceptions, feelings, and experiences with the group. The ancillary benefits section was beneficial in some interviews more than others as some respondents

chose to decline to offer any additional information while, more commonly, others took the time to give a several minute response.

Finally, I observed the weekly CSA pickup over the course of the fall season's program. For the observation portion of research, I acted as a participant observer to better blend in with members and consumers to mitigate the Hawthorne effect. Berg and Lune (2012) define the Hawthorne effect as changes in studied behavior as a result of researcher presence. I was a fellow patron of the coffee shop where the pickups took place and strove to be part of the setting. CSA participants and Co-Op members knew my status as a researcher upon introduction. To integrate with the Co-Op, I established rapport with the CSA participants and Co-Op representative present at every food pickup. I also was present at one additional CSA event. This allowed me to make observations of the participants as they actually behaved and addressed complications resulting from the Hawthorne Effect. These observations were conducted at weekly CSA pickups which were held once a week for 13 weeks from October to December from 4 to 7 PM CST. Additional observations were taken at a CSA potluck dinner farm tour. These provided a picture of community culture and the ideology within the group.

The Co-Op representative present at every food pickup was enthusiastic about the research and chose to introduce me to the CSA participants, Co-Op members, and farmers who were present. Her positive reaction to my presence and interviews was vital to my observation and interviews. As I was accepted by

her, those I observed visibly became more comfortable with me following the introduction and often gave encouraging responses to my research endeavors. After the introductions, I asked for interviews at their convenience and many responded positively. There were no outright rejections to interviews, however those who did not participate in the interviews cited a lack of time and availability. Still, these people offered encouragement to me in the research process.

The most difficult part of the observation portion of the research was blending in with the background of the setting so everyone would be comfortable while remaining close enough to hear and observe interactions. Although the Co-Op representative introduced me to the group as a researcher, I did not want to be obtrusive in natural interaction. As the pickups were held outside at a business, I had to contend with wind and music playing while listening and watching. When I moved closer to the pickup on the participant side of the tables, some participants began positioning themselves further away from me. It then became apparent that I would appear more natural while offering more information to sit at a table behind the CSA tables. I was fortunate that the coffee shop had immovable tables against the outside structural wall that were in this area behind the pickup. I also began making a small purchase from the coffee shop and set up my materials to blend in and look like many other students who often study at the establishment. Immediately, people affiliated with the program began to relax in my presence and I gathered even more information about the interactions as the building provided a natural windbreak and I was able to hear more clearly.

My interviews and observational data were transcribed. I formulated process and membership typology analyses to describe how the CSA program functions, the levels of participation, and individual roles within the group. This data was analyzed using the process of grounded theory. This entailed inductively analyzing the data as it was collected to provide a more detailed ethnography (Charmaz 2006). Inductive analysis was used to determine major themes that I found important during the investigation to explore further (Charmaz 2006). The initial data was coded and new themes relevant to the CSA culture became apparent (Charmaz 2006). Because inductive analysis was performed during the investigational process, these new avenues of inquiry provided a fuller picture of CSA culture.

This research study was reviewed and approved by the Texas State University Institutional Review Board. The Informed Consent Form given to all interview respondents is located in appendix B. All names cited in this report are pseudonyms.

## **CHAPTER V: FINDINGS**

The studied CSA program is run by a farming cooperative, or Co-Op, which is contrary to many previously studied CSA programs. This unique aspect of the CSA allows for a greater variety of crops and a larger yield for the food shares. The Co-Op initially started as a loose association of small, local farms with guiding tenets that combined their efforts to coordinate equipment rentals, assist in major agricultural infrastructure projects, and create a community of local sustainable agriculturalists. Upon recognizing that many of the members attended similar farmers' markets and desired increased sales, this Co-Op formed the studied CSA program in Spring 2018. From this point, the Co-Op's primary outward function became the CSA.

Another unique aspect of this CSA compared to other studied CSA programs is that the food pickups are hosted at a local coffeeshop instead of a farm because many farms supply crops to this program. Currently, the Co-Op is not focused on the demographics of CSA participants and is instead focusing on establishing and building the CSA program. There is much variety among CSA participants in their backgrounds and stages of life, although the majority of CSA participants appear to be at least 21. Lastly, this CSA program is unique in that it offers a trade option so unwanted goods may be traded for other goods a CSA participant may desire more.

### *Co-Op Core Tenets*

The Co-Op has a set of principles that they advertise on their website and during interactions with outsiders. The core tenets are described as follows. They focus on sustainable agriculture of small farms that are local to the area and abhor the use of genetically modified organisms (GMOs). They also believe that community involvement and support is crucial to the survival of small farming operations and require Co-Op members to volunteer at CSA events or on other farms when large projects like infrastructure repair are necessary. This volunteer work is hoped to foster relationships among the members so friendships develop in addition to the business collaboration of the Co-Op.

Other benefits of friendships developing between the Farmers and Co-Op members include a small yearly music festival hosted at one of the farms which the other members assist in which is not affiliated with the Co-Op and the sharing of agricultural knowledge. This produces more financial capital available to the farmers and improves the quality of their crops while reducing the sense of competition between the small farms. Furthermore, by promoting the development of personal connections between Co-Op members, satisfaction among members appears to be increased. People expressed that they feel more committed to the principles of the organization and that the goal of growing small-scale agriculture's importance is attainable. Camaraderie and regular contact with like-minded individuals are vital to the continuation of membership in the Co-Op.

### *Weekly Pickup Organization*

Every week of the CSA cycle, the Co-Op sets up at a local coffee house with whom they partner. This coffee house allows them free use of their space with the requirement that they also have a small market table for their customers to purchase from. This is a direct contradiction to the CSA model because it requires additional food that may go unsold to be present, however the two businesses came to a mutually beneficial arrangement that addresses this problem. The coffee house purchases 5 CSA shares that are displayed on the market table. What goes unsold is added to their kitchen stock and will be used in daily specials. This guarantees that all of the produce is sold. Additionally, this market table also functions as a “trade” table. CSA participants who do not like or have no use for a certain item may hold it aside and trade it for what is available on the trade/market table. Since the market items are priced, it offers a method for equal trading values.

The CSA pickup is set out on a collapsible table arranged by item with heavier goods towards the beginning side. While participants may start from either end, the Co-Op representative present may guide them to the preferred starting point by placing the weekly newsletters and bags at one end without directly stating there is a start point. Participants are allowed to select their produce from the displays or may receive assistance from the Co-Op representative if unable to do so themselves. Children are often present with their parents and are encouraged to participate in the food selection as well.

The trade table is a unique option in this CSA program and is very popular with participants. The participants will nearly always give a reason for their trade when they set aside an item. These reasons include a dislike for a food, food allergy, leftovers from the previous week, or in some cases, the participant has a small garden where they grow that particular food themselves. When setting aside something to trade, the participant will place the good or goods on the trade table and select an item or items of equal or lesser value that are available on the table.

The weekly food pickups of vegetables and fruit are also accompanied by a partnering meat CSA program run by the Co-Op. Pickups for this are held once monthly. Participation in the vegetable CSA is not required for participation in the meat CSA. Those who participate in the meat CSA arrive to the same location as the vegetable CSA and wait in the same line as the vegetable CSA as the Co-Op representative handles both pickups. The meat in the basket is detailed verbally and in the newsletter as the representative takes the meat from cold storage to pack the baskets. By providing a detailed list of the products and the farms they come from, each farm is given recognition while the collaborative efforts of the Co-Op are reasserted.

At times, participants are unable to come during the CSA pickup windows. Carrie, the Co-Op representative dedicated to the CSA program and CSA participants, will arrange for alternative methods to pick up the food. This often means that the food is placed in a disposable bag, labeled with the participant's



name and placed in cold storage at the coffee house. Additionally, people may send friends or family to pick up the food. To ensure people aren't taking others' food, the representative will have the participant give consent to release the food to a named individual. This was particularly important for the CSA program during the week of Thanksgiving when many of the participants chose to send others to pick up the food. Also, some participants specifically requested the food be donated that week as they were out of the area and had no one to go in their place. Their wish was for the unused to help the local community instead of going to waste.

During the pickups, participants are offered a three-hour window in which to pick up their produce. This allows them to come at their convenience. Because of this open format, people often come in waves that correspond with common times of work shift changes. When these waves of participants arrive, they must wait in a line for their goods and often begin conversations with other members of their household or other participants. Family stories, recipes, and general discussion of the produce are the topic of such conversations. While they may not always learn the names of the other participants, these members encourage and reinforce the main themes of the CSA program culture. At every food pickup, the food producers were present and purchased items from the coffeeshop while they converse near the pickup tables. While some specifically volunteer to assist in running the pickups, more often these producers were there informally due to a desire to meet CSA participants and speak with the other producers. When present, they introduced themselves to CSA participants and discussed relevant

agricultural news, food preparation ideas, and community events with others there. Having the agricultural producers nearby in a relaxed environment encouraged communication and relationship building within the CSA program.

In confirmation of the literature, the demographics of those picking up the food were spread almost evenly across the genders with slightly more women than men attending. The Co-Op does not keep records of which individual signs a household up for the program so there is no way to confirm that women sign up more frequently than men. During one interview, Anna, a CSA participant, stated that it was her husband who signed them up, but she primarily picked up the food due to his class and work schedule. Every week, both men and women retrieved their produce in equal numbers, often attending together. At all but one of the pickups, when children were present, a woman accompanied them. The one instance when a man came with his children, he also had his father present and noted that it was a special occasion for them to join him.

### *Membership Typology*

The uniqueness of this CSA is demonstrated by the terminology they have developed to describe themselves. These terms began to be used by those affiliated with the Co-Op and their use spread to the CSA as a whole. The following typology is derived from the terminology respondents routinely use to type each other. It is important to note that membership in the Co-Op requires involvement in the CSA program either through the production of food or as a Co-Op representative at weekly pickups. CSA membership does not require

involvement with the Co-Op, however the share payment does support the financial side of the Co-Op. The definitions were obtained through observations and clarified during interviews.

“Eaters” - Within the Co-Op side of the CSA, participants are often affectionately called eaters. This refers to their position as consumers of the produce and meat provided through the weekly pickups. The CSA participants initially did not have a commonly agreed upon self-applied label and often described themselves as CSA members or eaters. The demographics of this group range from college students to families with young children to older professionals and retirees. Within the Eaters category, some consciously set themselves apart from other consumers. This group consists of those who have experience with gardening or raising small livestock who choose to participate in the CSA. Their motivations for joining the CSA vary from focusing on non-edible plants, a perceived inability to grow vegetables, a lack of space and time to devote to gardening food crops, and a desire to support local farmers. Overall, Eaters described the motivations for joining as a desire to eat healthier, fresher food that was grown locally which confirms the motivations in previous studies.

“Growers” - The Co-Op members who grow the food are called “growers” by all those affiliated with this program. To be considered a Grower, one must work at a participating farm or garden within the Co-Op although they are

not required to be an owner. Due to the fact that the Growers may not own or operate a farm, the term farmer is specifically not used in this community. Among the Growers, demographics vary as people from many ethnicities, races, educational levels, and growing experiences work for or run the growing operations that supply the CSA. Additionally, the amount of time spent on growing is inconsistent across the group as some Growers work full time while others work part time in agriculture. Contrary to previous literature on CSA programs, some of the Growers participate in the CSA program as well. These “Grower-Eaters” expressed a desire to support the program, reject industrial agriculture, and acknowledged that they wanted some produce they did not specialize in. Since the food pickup is sourced from multiple farms within the CSA, there is a greater food variety than what one small farm could produce for sale alone. To address the problems with receiving food from their own farm that they already have access to, they will trade their products for other available goods on the market/trade table. Growers’ motivations for forming the CSA are to have guaranteed sales which confirms previous literature on this topic.

“Co-Op members” - In order to be a Co-Op member, growing and contributing to the CSA is not strictly required. While many of these non-growing Co-Op members grow food on their own or have plans to contribute in the future, they serve as Co-Op representatives to the public, perform administrative and business duties, and may be on the Co-Op Board.

<b>Table 1. Membership Status</b>		
Membership Status	Function	Requirement to Join
Grower	Grows the food for the CSA program. This includes the owners of the farms and workers that they employ.	Approved admittance to Co-Op
Eater	CSA Participant	CSA share purchase
Grower-Eater	Contributes to CSA food and is a CSA participant.	Approved admittance to Co-Op and CSA share purchase.
Co-Op Member	Provides administrative, strategic planning, and customer support services to the Co-Op and CSA program	Board approval or election to position.

### *Process of Membership*

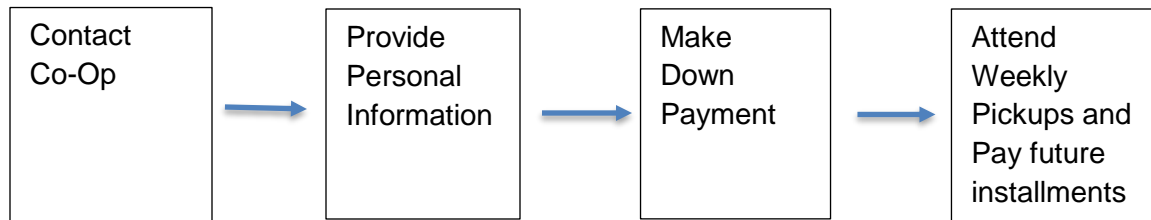
There are three processes of membership within this program based upon the role an individual takes: Eater, Grower, or Co-Op Member. All have their own requirements and different kinds of interaction with the other types of members.

To become a CSA participant in this program, an adult must sign up in person with a Co-Op representative. There is information and advertising conducted online, however all such materials refer interested parties to contact the Co-Op. For many of those interviewed, the advertisements and information on social media during this phase of the membership process was helpful, however their interest in following the posts declined soon after joining. The

person's information may be gathered in person, in email, or via telephone, however most sign up in person at local farmers' markets or at CSA pickups during the previous or current seasons. Any individual may become a CSA participant, or Eater, as long as they purchase a share in the CSA and pay up front or in installments throughout a season. One does not need to have agricultural or gardening experience to participate; they merely must pay for the share and retrieve the food on the scheduled pickup day. As previously stated, there are three types of shares one can purchase: vegetable only, meat only, or vegetable and meat. This is entirely up to the CSA participant which allows them to determine the best option for their household and lifestyle.

A unique aspect of this CSA program lies in the fact that they permit late starts and accept payment in installments. This addresses previously established problems of accessibility outlined in the literature that prevents new membership and membership retention. The CSA program is currently designed to provide enough agricultural products for fifty shares. Each cycle, the coffee shop purchases five of these shares which leaves forty-five remaining for purchase. Until all of these are filled, new households may sign up part way through the cycle and pay for the number of weeks remaining. The total cost of the CSA share is divided by the number of weeks and may be broken into monthly payments to reduce the upfront financial burdens associated with CSA programs while still giving the farmers the benefit of money and guaranteed sales in advance. Additionally, if CSA participants have extenuating circumstances arise

that prevents their continued participation, they may arrange to drop out of the cycle prior to its conclusion.

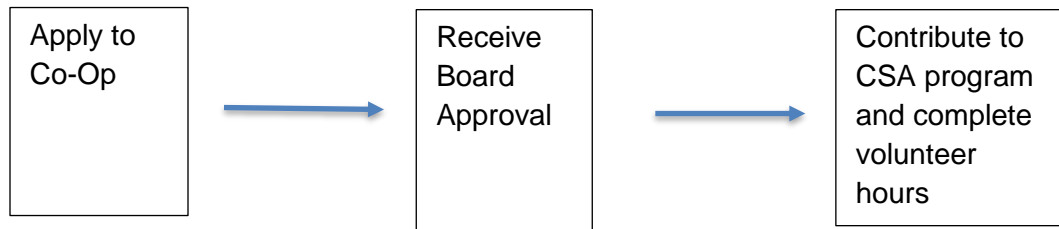


**Figure 1. CSA Participant Membership Process**

A majority of the Growers affiliated with the Co-Op are original founding members of the Co-Op. As previously mentioned, upon founding the organization they outlined a series of tenets that promoted sustainable agricultural practices and encouraged the development of connections between small farms. As the organization grew, new guidelines and requirements were established for the admittance of new farms. Applicants must gross under \$250,000 annually when they apply, follow the standards set by the Food Safety Modernization Act, and follow the other core tenets of the organization listed above. Upon entry, all farms must participate in the CSA program, volunteer at Co-Op events, attend meetings, and collaborate on projects to help other farms within the Co-Op.

Growers described their membership as beneficial due to the contacts and friendships formed with other Co-Op Growers. Additionally, they discussed the helpful aspects of the communal agricultural knowledge. If one farm has a problem, likely another member has information that will address it. Additionally, Growers appreciated the opportunity to perform local outreach as a group

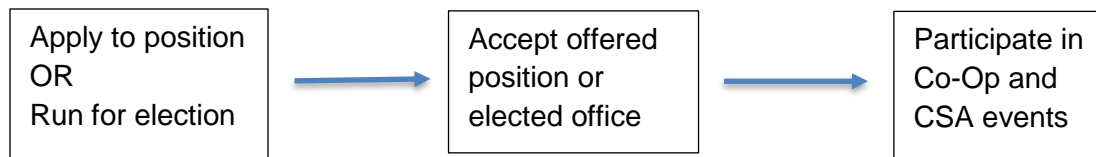
through the CSA program. They stated that their perceived social and economic impact in the area was greater as a group than as individuals.



**Figure 2. Grower Membership Process**

Some members of the local community may join the administrative and governing bodies of the Co-Op. As Co-Op members, they may be elected to positions on the Board or are recommended to provide administrative help to the Co-Op. This form of membership is attained through personal and business connections within the local agricultural community. Of these members, many are farmers or plan to farm and join the Co-Op as Growers in the future. The reasons for becoming a Co-Op member include a desire to help the Co-Op grow; a desire to support local, alternative agriculture; and a desire to begin working with the Co-Op if the person does not qualify for membership as a Grower or is otherwise unable to join. Becoming a Co-Op member offers beginning or potential farmers who are interested in alternative agriculture to learn about growing methods, to build contacts within the local farming community among the Growing members, and to contribute to alternative agriculture in a non-growing capacity.





**Figure 3. Co-Op Member Membership Process**

### *Cultural Themes*

Through the observations and interviews, four cultural themes that are important to the foundation and perpetuation of the community became apparent. These themes are Opposition, Education, Community, and Personal Connection. The following is a discussion of the manifestations and beliefs surrounding the themes.

#### Opposition

There is an overarching theme of opposition within the alternative food movement (Pollan 2006). This is echoed in the group culture of the studied CSA program. In their interactions at weekly pickups and during interviews, Eaters repeatedly positioned themselves as against produce procured from chain grocery stores. Some mentioned Wal-Mart and HEB by name as having fruit and vegetables that fail to meet their expectations of quality. Consistently, Eaters would state that after they began participating in the CSA program they disliked purchasing produce from large grocery stores due to the lack in quality and taste. These statements were often extended to include other household members like children who purportedly refused to eat carrots bought from a supermarket. This

presentation of self and household as staunchly against the conventional food system was important to the Eaters' identification with the community.

Marcos, a farmer who provides chicken to the meat CSA, stated numerous times that the opposition to industrial agriculture offered "a window" for the Growers and Eaters to come together. For Clark, an Eater with a young child, the "weekly surprise" of the food makes this opposition tangible and reaffirms his desire to support local agriculture while connecting to the farmers.

During an interview, an Eater-Grower mentioned that they only go to grocery stores for dry goods like toilet paper, flour, and peanut butter. When stated during the pickups, Co-Op representatives and other Eaters would offer encouragement for the opposition by offering advice on how to further reduce store purchases and relay their own experiences concerning their own elevated produce expectations.

Some Eaters have used their participation as the starting point for completely altering their food ways. Georgia, a small businesswoman who joined during the first CSA cycle, has begun gardening and no longer participates in the vegetable portion of the CSA. Instead, she buys a meat CSA share so she "can still support her friends, avoid the big stores, and enjoy the results of gardening." She views her shift from the vegetable to meat CSA as more beneficial since she is only cooking for herself and struggled to consume all of the produce. She also began posting information about the CSA in her store and encouraged other locals to join in. In addition to supporting her farming friends, she expressed the

necessity of rejecting industrial agriculture as “a small step for humans to survive... because the environment is crumbling.” Others echoed the sentiment that alternative agriculture was environmentally responsible and an imperative to “create change and have a closer relationship with food and the whole food cycle” as Maggie put it.

The Co-Op would have plastic bags at the pickups for the Eaters’ convenience; however many of the Eaters would bring their own reusable bags and baskets from home. These same Eaters would reject the plastic bags as they stated that they were environmentally conscious in their packaging as well as their food choice. On the occasions when Eaters did not have a reusable bag, they would apologize to the Co-Op representative and lament at the waste associated with the plastic bags. The Co-Op representative would reassure them that there was no need for apology as reusable bags were not required and that the Eater’s effort to bring bags was appreciated. When the use of plastic bags was questioned by a new Eater, Co-Op members stated that the material was selected for convenience and low cost and that they encourage recycling the bags after use. Additionally, they pointed out that the majority of Eaters use reusable cloth bags.

The presentation of self and household as against both the conventional food system and against single use plastic bags show the importance of symbolic interaction within the group’s culture. Eaters desired to align themselves with others in the community and by verbally stating their preferences for the CSA

food while rejecting industrial agriculture helped reinforce this aspect of the culture that had developed from the core Co-Op tenets.

### Education

Children were present at every CSA pickup and event. When selecting food for their baskets, parents would encourage their children to choose the vegetables while they held the bags. The Co-Op representatives would speak to both the parents and the children about what was offered each week. Depending on the child's age and apparent comprehension, the style of speech was adjusted. For younger children, the representative would say the name of the food, offer a description, and occasionally ask the child if they liked that food or a similar food that they related. When a child volunteered ideas on how to prepare the food, the representative would reply enthusiastically and encourage further discussion. In one instance where satsumas, a fruit similar to an orange, were in the basket, a child suggested making juice for smoothies. Taking this opportunity to educate both the parent and child about this fruit, Carrie informed them that satsumas were better for eating and would not produce as much juice as a traditional orange. This type of interaction occurred at every food pickup.

When interviewing Carrie, she repeated how small, sustainable agriculture is “a way of life” and educating others about it “helps solidify the community.” From her point of view, a “good organization makes for a good community” and the more knowledgeable the people within it are, more can be accomplished. Furthermore, by bringing the farmers together in a Co-Op, the “sharing of

knowledge and expertise that takes place boosts the quality” of the CSA program.

Furthermore, during the wait to select their produce, participants share recipes and stories of how they prepared the goods from the previous week or offer advice to each other on how to best store the vegetables for later use. Co-Op representatives will interject with additional information about the products available as previously mentioned and will direct the Eaters’ attention to the newsletter which contains a recipe that utilizes the products. When bok choy was available for two weeks, one woman lamented that she didn’t know how to prepare it. The man waiting behind her offered several suggestions on recipes which flourished into conversations about their eating preferences and habits before shifting to their families and work. What began as a brief complaint turned into a fifteen-minute conversation. At future pickups, these two would greet each other and have conversations about local events, new recipes, and family tastes which shows the impact that sharing knowledge has on bringing together a community.

The events are designed to educate the Eaters as well. Every CSA cycle, the Co-Op coordinates a farm tour and potluck dinner event that serves two functions: to teach the Eaters about one of the farms they get their produce from and to bring together the Growers so the Eaters can learn about the people producing their food. At the event during this cycle, many Growers arrived early, assisted in set up, and began constructing the atmosphere through their

conversations about their histories with agriculture and their personal stories growing and using similar methods to the farm where the event was held.

This event was designed as a potluck so the burden of cooking was not on a particular person and all participating would feel like they contributed. The food had signs listing the dish, maker, and the farm where the produce had been sourced. The Eaters who attended and brought food followed this format and occasionally asked Co-Op members where certain vegetables from the past produce basket were grown to fit with the other signs. Some Eaters brought food prepared with ingredients purchased from stores, however this food was still appreciated and welcomed.

In addition to meeting other community members and the fellowship that the dinner was intended to provide, the farm tour offered Eaters the chance to see the land where some of their food was grown, learn about the labor and care that goes into food production, and connect with the land.

One Grower named Sherry consistently spoke of the importance of education to the continuation of the CSA program. She views it as a necessary component to educating everyone in the group about the Co-Op's principles and connects it to the larger alternative food movement. In her words:

We don't have much in the way of organic. It's not to say we don't use some organic methods - actually the farms have to follow many of the same rules as organic farms - but the organic certification is cost

prohibitive. So, we have to educate newcomers to the CSA why we aren't technically organic. Then we show them how we go beyond organic by using sustainable practices and avoiding GMO crops. If we didn't do this, they wouldn't know and might not be willing to participate.

### Community

Over the course of the cycle, Eaters who would pick up their goods at consistent times would become familiar with each other in addition to the Co-Op representative. Conversations in line expanded from discussions only about the products to discussions of family life, work, and local events.

During the interviews, several participants mentioned the importance of community as their reason for joining. A married couple who requested to be interviewed together spoke of their experiences with other CSA programs in other cities as vital to their connection to the community. As they move frequently due to their professions, they described a sense of disconnection from the cities in which they reside. By participating in the CSA in San Marcos, Eaters feel connected to the local community through the food they eat and through their support of small farmers. Their food choice places them in the local culture.

Gerald, an Eater, stated that the food gave him a "sense of place" and belonging. Even outside of the interviews, Eaters would remark to various Co-Op representatives that they felt like the CSA made the town feel "more like home" and familiar. James, an Eater who considers himself an advanced gardener,

chooses to participate purely for the connections the membership brings and the support it offers to local farmers. While he finds it a “challenge” to consume all the food, he spoke of transforming it into a “challenge to trying new ways of cooking” and shares the end result with family and friends.

Others echoed James and described their participation as a method of bringing together friends and family. Another married couple shares their food basket with the wife’s parents. By splitting the food basket and scheduling meals together using the food, the couple said they felt a deeper sense of family in addition to the improved taste and quality of their meals. In preparing meals with extended family, they are developing relationships and communication with others that might not be otherwise present.

During the pickups, Eaters who become acquaintances and friends with other Eaters and Growers will plan to attend local events. This extends their social circle beyond the typical group of workplace associates, classmates, and previously established friendships to include those who share their beliefs and motivations for joining the alternative food movement.

### Personal Connection

The Co-Op representative, Carrie, who is present every week at the pickup makes a concerted effort to learn more about the Eaters than just their names. She makes an effort to ask about food preferences, personal experiences with growing food if there are any, and about the Eaters’ family lives



especially if they bring significant others and children to the pickups. From this, she attempts to draw people into conversations about the food and tailors small talk to their interests while they are selecting their produce.

Several Eaters expressed their appreciation for her interest in them during the interviews and said the conversations were an important part of their satisfaction with the participation. Louise, a new participant, stated that “Carrie makes me feel like I belong. I was nervous about joining conversations at first but now I make sure to come early so I have time to join in.” Additionally, some mentioned they had made friendships with other Eaters who were picking up their baskets after hearing the conversation the representative was having with someone else.

Connecting over food was also facilitated at the farm tour potluck dinner. The event was designed to bring together the Eaters and Growers at one time. As Eaters and Growers may consistently miss each other at the weekly pickups, the event, which was held on a weekend so as not to conflict with the weekly pickup or most traditional work schedules, provided a space to commune and develop relationships beyond business transactions. As attendance was not mandatory, those who were present recognized a deeper commitment to active involvement in conversations which spurred further fellowship.

The driving force behind the start of CSA programs in general is the desire to know who produces the food consumed. As the CSA program sources from a cooperative farming organization, sharing the information on which farm supplied

which product could prove difficult, especially since participants could forget after being told or simply not ask at all. To address this potential problem, the weekly newsletter included in each basket lists the specific produce varieties and where they are sourced from. The different farms may produce similar vegetables and harvest at different times based upon crop needs so this can show a change in source of the food or specify a difference in type of product.

In addition to recognizing the source of the food, the weekly newsletter occasionally contains Farmer Spotlights. These provide information about the history of the farms, a short biography of the farmers, and a picture of the farm. For some Eaters, this is their main source of information about the farmers if they happen to pick up their food when the farmers are not present. In every interview, the respondents stated this newsletter was more important to them than social media. Carter, a working father, stated “I just don’t have time to get on social media. The newsletter is in my hand and on my fridge. Also, we can sit with our daughter and talk about the farms together.”

Farmers and their families do make an effort to be present at the pickups when convenient for them and will purchase drinks and food at the coffee shop while socializing with friends and acquaintances nearby the pickup tables. When their foods are being placed into baskets, a Co-Op representative will point out the farmers who are present. Sometimes the Grower will introduce themselves to the Eater or the Eater will approach the Grower to introduce themselves, ask questions, and discuss topics like small scale agriculture, environmental issues,

and local events. By connecting the food consumed to the person growing it, the food is transformed from a product with less significance to a product whose sale is vital to the continuation of the farms and farmers themselves.

### *Symbolic Interaction in the CSA Program*

Evidence of symbolic interaction was present within the community. As the culture within this group formed from the guiding Co-Op principles and mutually agreed upon tenets between the Eaters, Growers, and Co-Op members, the actions of community members when among their peers reinforced the culture of opposition, education, community, and personal connection.

When Eaters came to pick up their produce and mentioned how they now rejected food purchased at the store in favor of CSA food, the Co-Op representative assisting them would agree. If children echoed this or the parent spoke for them making similar comments or stating “This is his favorite time of the week. He loves the vegetables here so much better,” the representative’s response of encouragement reinforced the group’s ideology. Other clues included smiling, nodding, or raising volume in exclamation. Additionally, other Eaters would interject into the conversation and agree to confirm their status within the group which confirms the concept of identity and its reinforcement as important to symbolic interaction.

Education draws Eaters further into the CSA and the alternative food movement. By educating the Eaters on the struggles and successes that small

sustainable farms experience, the Co-Op hopes to make more people aware of the necessity of programs like the CSA to the continuation of these practices. Additionally, the education can contribute to the feelings of community within the group. Offering information on why a farm plants a specific crop or uses a technique that is local to the region connects the food to the place. In highlighting how a crop is different from that found in a supermarket, the education can impress the need for opposition while showcasing the importance of locality and therefore community. This aspect of the CSA culture further enforces the group's beliefs and allows Eaters to justify their ongoing membership as principle driven as opposed to only an economic transaction.

The best example of this occurred when “real” baby carrots were featured in the pickup over several weeks. The first week, the representative educated each Eater about the differences between the “real” CSA baby carrots and store-bought baby carrots. While the store bought were generic carrots that had been shaved down, the “real” were a variety that are small in their size, were sweeter, and grow easily in the region. The following week the “real” baby carrots were present again and Eaters began exclaiming their happiness over this food while disparaging the store-bought version, discussing with others the higher quality and offering encouraging words to each other. From several of these conversations sprung new friendships among the Eaters which strengthened over subsequent weeks. In accordance with symbolic interaction, the concept of *authenticity* of product and agricultural practices is key to the “real” baby carrots (Goffman 1959). That which is authentic is perceived as higher status and

commitment to authenticity adds to the CSA's importance and prestige therefore the appreciation of "real" food as opposed to machine made food contributes to identification with the community.

From the simple act of educating Eaters on the crop, its differences and importance to local agriculture, the idea of opposition, community, and personal connection blossomed. The situation with "real" baby carrots was echoed further with other crops and laid a base of conversation among Eaters, Co-Op members, and Growers to discuss in the future.

The commiseration that occurred during the pickups displayed the influence of interaction on small group culture. When a woman lamented that her extended family and friends continued to eat produce purchased from Walmart, another Eater mimicked her tones and offered advice to better educate outsiders to bring them into the CSA community. For others who shared recipes and stories of family related to the CSA food, fellow Eaters began interjecting their own stories. The commonality of the experiences reaffirmed their status as group members and contributed to the sense of belonging to the community. Through the sharing of recipes, group members increased the social bonding within the group which increased their commitment and impressed the importance of these interactions.

Another week, a woman arrived with a locally handmade basket to carry her vegetables home in. For the following twenty minutes, Eaters, Growers, and Co-Op representatives had a conversation about other locally handmade goods.

Some broke into pairs as they launched into chats about their experiences with the local area and the importance of supporting local businesses. Although this was not directly related to food and agriculture, this event bolstered the core values of the group. It reinforced the idea of supporting local businesses while rejecting mass produced products, new information and knowledge was shared about where to find and how to care for them, and personal connections were forged as the people realized the importance of community and attachment to their city. The formation of community and communal knowledge is facilitated through meaningful interaction and promotes the idea that not only is the group important but is a necessary part of life.

Additionally, the interaction surrounding education was present during Eater-Grower interactions. The Growers were seen both as regular people and treated with some degree of respect and deference when speaking about agriculture and crops. When sharing knowledge, the Growers were elevated in the eyes of Eaters as they fell quiet, listened intently, and attempted to ask questions that elicited further responses.

Over the course of the CSA cycle, it became apparent that these social bonds were strengthening and adjusting to include all of the community members. This reflects the concept of prolonged participation increasing community bonds. By the end of the cycle, Eaters expressed dismay at the prospect of waiting until the Spring cycle to receive the weekly baskets and lack of contact with the other community members. At the last pickup, many of the

Growers and Co-Op members were present and an informal gathering of Eaters, Growers, and Co-Op members took place with people coming and going as their schedule allowed. Some scheduled times to get together during the interim period between cycles while others shared contact information to stay in touch.

Without the foundation provided by the symbolic interactions of the twelve-week cycle, this scene might not have taken place. Indeed, the foundation laid will likely aid in participant retention which benefits the CSA program and will ensure its continuation. With each following cycle, new members will be added and the group culture will shift with membership changes, however the core themes that are reinforced through weekly interactions will help future new members adjust and adapt to the community culture. This method of socializing new members speaks to the importance of fronts as established community members teach newcomers how to behave through their symbolic performance. The new members develop a distinctive sense of self over time as they identify with one of the three types of CSA participation (Charmaz, et al. 2019).

## CHAPTER VI: CONCLUSION

*Opposition, Education, Community, and Personal Connection* are vital to the culture created within this CSA program. These four cultural themes coalesce to create a vibrant unique culture where emphasis is placed upon participation. Overall, the community members are welcoming and passionate about their food consumption although not all realize they are participating in the alternative food movement.

Older Eaters view their participation as a return to roots and the ways they ate growing up before the proliferation of superstores and bargain markets that are facilitated by industrial agriculture. Overall, the Eaters' motivations for participation were to support local agriculture and eat healthier and fresher food. The main themes are additional benefits that these individuals express appreciation for which confirms the literature on participant motivation. Others are conscious of the problems associated with industrial agriculture and use their consumption as a means to reject the conventional food system, educate others, form a similarly consuming community, and develop personal relationships. This awareness also aligns the CSA program with the broader alternative food movement although, ultimately, the level of commitment to the alternative food movement is not as important as the commitment to local agriculture in this community. A positive feature of this study stems from its location in Texas as it confirms and extends the literature beyond previous research focuses in the Northeast and West Coast areas of the U.S.



Eaters and Growers are cognizant that the convenience and availability of industrial agriculture is both valuable and damaging to food ways and the environment. Most, if not all, of the community members continue to use the supermarkets and goods provided by industrial agriculture and are not shamed or discouraged for this. Instead, the encouragement of using locally and sustainably produced goods whenever possible is the main goal. The sentiment that relying on supermarkets as little as possible aligns with the alternative food movement while the acceptance that not everyone can do this decreases the likelihood that those group members will feel alienated. This orientation may appear contradictory but clearly fits the pragmatic orientation of symbolic interaction (Charmaz, et al. 2019).

The fact that social media played a far less important role than the printed newsletter was surprising. However the newsletter does serve as a tangible reminder of the farms compared to the digital format of social media which requires internet access and social media accounts and are not visible unless sought out. This finding could also be the result of the demographics of the participants. While the ages spanned adulthood, many of those observed and interviewed mentioned having time consuming family obligations and careers which could impact their use of social media. Going forward, research should take this into consideration and explore future generations who came of age after the proliferation of social media to make note of any changes in attitudes and the cultural relevance. During observation and interviews, the heavy prevalence of newsletter discussion showed its importance to connecting the community. The

physical nature of a printed newsletter offered confirmation of membership status to outsiders and was a method of education for Eaters and their families.

I have identified several limitations to this research. The major limitation of this study is that I was able to observe only cycle, or 12-week season, in which the CSA program is conducted. In future, longitudinal research on a CSA program that extends over multiple cycles should be conducted to determine how the culture and community evolve over time. Upon conclusion of the observed CSA cycle, it became difficult to reach community members as the holiday season approached. Future research could include a survey given to community members at the end of a cycle. Additionally, the participants who were consistently unable to obtain their produce basket during the pickup time frame were not observed and interactions between them and the Co-Op representatives were unobservable. Furthermore, as an outsider to the group, I may not have been able to fully comprehend some of the aspects of connection and culture that developed.

This ethnography and analysis of group culture using a symbolic interactionist framework addresses the aforementioned gap in the literature both on the culture of CSA programs and CSA programs in Texas. Future research on small group culture of CSA programs should take place, especially in other areas of Texas, since much of the state has an extended growing season due to the warm climate and an abundance of rural land.

The most important sociological aspect of this group is the way the four cultural themes are critical to the group's existence, although enacted both implicitly and explicitly by participants. Through the selection of language, the use of developing relationships, and the positive enforcement of accepted and lauded behavior, the community carries out the cultural themes identified.

## **APPENDIX SECTION**

### **Appendix A: Glossary of Commonly Used Terms**

- Eater - CSA participant.
- Grower - Farmer who contributes to the CSA program.
- Real - This term has two meanings. The first relates to the concept that the crop doesn't require extra processing to take the form desired. The most prevalent occurrence of this was with real baby carrots from the CSA which were a varietal that produces small carrots compared to store bought baby carrots which are regular carrots that are cut and shaved to be small. The second definition relates to the concept of connection to the farmers. CSA participants would call CSA food real compared to the mass-produced store goods because of the knowledge of who grew the food.
- Sustainable - This term was used to describe the growing practices of the farmers as well as the style of living that both Growers and Eaters attempted to carry out. This includes chemical free farming, using native crops, cyclical growing, and reducing the chemicals and plastic used in everyday life.
- Varietal – This is a specific type of crop being referenced. At some pickups, this was important as there were two varieties of the same species of vegetable or the varietal changed from week to week. One

example of this was spicy purple mustard greens or regular mustard greens.

## **Appendix B: Informed Consent Form**

### **INFORMED CONSENT**

**Study Title: An Ethnography of Community Supported Agriculture**

**Principal Investigator: Emily Watkins**

**Email: emw51@txstate.edu**

**Phone: (512)413-1221**

**Co-Investigator/Faculty Advisor: Dr. J.A. Kotarba**

**Email: joseph.kotarba@txstate.edu**

**Phone: (512)245-8905**

This consent form will give you the information you will need to understand why this research study is being done and why you are being invited to participate. It will also describe what you will need to do to participate as well as any known risks, inconveniences or discomforts that you may have while participating. We encourage you to ask questions at any time. If you decide to participate, you will be asked to sign this form and it will be a record of your agreement to participate. You will be given a copy of this form to keep.

#### **PURPOSE AND BACKGROUND**

You are invited to participate in a research study to learn more about local agricultural cooperatives and community supported agriculture (CSA) programs. The information gathered will be used to an ethnography of a local agricultural cooperative, their CSA program, and their participants. You are being asked to participate because you are a member of the cooperative or are a participant in the community supported agriculture program.

#### **PROCEDURES**

If you agree to be in the study, you will be asked to participate in one to two brief interviews: these will be conducted at participant convenience or at the CSA pick-up. Each interview will last approximately twenty to thirty minutes. The interview will be conversational. During the interviews, you will be asked about your involvement with the group, your initial motivations to participate, and the experiences you have had since participating. The interview may be audio-recorded with permission and the researcher may take notes as well.

#### **RISKS/DISCOMFORTS**

The interview will include a section concerning length of time participated and level of involvement in the group. Your name will not appear anywhere in this study. Due to the make-up of the cooperative's membership and participants, the combined answers to

these questions may make an individual person identifiable. We will make every effort to protect participants' confidentiality. However, if you are uncomfortable answering any of these questions, you may choose not to answer.

In the event that some of the interview questions make you uncomfortable or upset, you are always free to decline to answer or to stop your participation at any time. Should you feel discomfort after participating and you are a Texas State University student, you may contact the University Health Services for counseling services at (512)245-2208. They are located at 5-4.1 LBJ Student Center, 601 University Drive, San Marcos, TX 78666.

If you are not a Texas State student, please see the following list of local counseling services.

Cedar Creek Associates, 631 Mill Street, San Marcos, TX 78666	(512)396-8540
Angela Tierney, LPC, 3 La Quinta Street, Wimberley, TX 78676	(512)393-4691
Hope Family Guidance, 1300 Dacy Lane #235, Kyle, TX 78640	(512)262-6020

### **BENEFITS/ALTERNATIVES**

There will be no direct benefit to you from participating in this study. However, the information that you provide will benefit the current knowledge of agricultural cooperatives, alternative food systems, and methods of community building.

### **EXTENT OF CONFIDENTIALITY**

Reasonable efforts will be made to keep the personal information in your research record private and confidential. Any identifiable information obtained in connection with this study will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission or as required by law. The members of the research team and the Texas State University Office of Research Compliance (ORC) may access the data. The ORC monitors research studies to protect the rights and welfare of research participants.

Your name will not be used in any written reports or publications which result from this research. Data will be kept for three years (per federal regulations) after the study is completed and then destroyed.

### **PAYMENT/COMPENSATION**

You will not be paid for your participation in this study.

### **PARTICIPATION IS VOLUNTARY**

You do not have to be in this study if you do not want to. You may also refuse to answer any questions you do not want to answer. If you volunteer to be in this study, you may withdraw from it at any time without consequences of any kind or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

## QUESTIONS

If you have any questions or concerns about your participation in this study, you may contact the Principal Investigator, Emily Watkins: (512)413-1221 or [emw51@txstate.edu](mailto:emw51@txstate.edu).

This project was approved by the Texas State IRB on [date]. Pertinent questions or concerns about the research, research participants' rights, and/or research-related injuries to participants should be directed to the IRB Chair, Dr. Denise Gobert 512-245-8351 – ([dgobert@txstate.edu](mailto:dgobert@txstate.edu)) or to Monica Gonzales, IRB Regulatory Manager 512-245-2334 - ([meg201@txstate.edu](mailto:meg201@txstate.edu)).

Your participation in this research project may be recorded using audio recording devices. Recordings will assist with accurately documenting your responses. You have the right to refuse the audio recording. Please select one of the following options: I consent to audio recording: Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_

## DOCUMENTATION OF CONSENT

I have read this form and decided that I will participate in the project described above. Its general purposes, the particulars of involvement and possible risks have been explained to my satisfaction. I understand I can withdraw at any time.

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**Printed Name** of Study  
Participant

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**Signature** of Study  
Participant

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Date

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Signature of Person Obtaining Consent

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Date



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