Economic and cultural sociologists have devoted considerable attention to the emergence of “conscious” consumption in new ethical markets designed to ameliorate risks associated with mass markets. Markets specializing in local organic foods in the United States have captured the attention of many scholars because they have grown at an unprecedented rate this decade. In particular, this type of conscious consumption has increased most dramatically through farmers markets and Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) programs (Guthman 2004; Thompson and Coskuner-Balli 2007). But why, exactly, are consumers motivated to engage in this local economic activity? Scholars largely tend to assume that mutually exclusive individual or collective interests motivate conscious consumers. Some research suggests consumers prioritize individualistic interests, such as acquiring nutritional benefits, avoiding pesticide and chemical residue, seeking flavor and quality, and obtaining social distinction (Szasz 2007; Johnston 2008). Other research suggests consumers are more concerned with collectivist interests, such as the promotion of environmental sustainability, economic and political activism, and community health (Raynolds 2000; Seyfang 2006; Allen and Wilson 2008;). Because of this binary assumption in the literature, very few studies have qualitatively analyzed how a combination of individual and collective interests might equally motivate conscious consumers who participate in ethical markets. However, as an increasing proportion of the population becomes aware of the interconnection between individual and collective health (Dunlap and York, 2008), it is likely that a growing class of ethical consumers are beginning to adopt a broader motivational perspective. Using the hyper-growth of local organic markets as a case study, I hypothesize local food enthusiasts express broad and holistic motivational orientations that transcend this divide in the literature on conscious consumption.
What is the project intended to accomplish?

A debate has surfaced within the public and scholarly community in regards to the nutritional and health value of organic foods. A prominent study recently published in the *Annals of Internal Medicine* by researchers at Stanford University argued organic foods might not be “healthier” or more “nutrient-rich” than conventionally grown food (Smith-Spangler et al. 2012). The results of this study quickly disseminated throughout media outlets and onto the front page of *The New York Times* (Chang 2012). Skeptics of organic production jumped on this study as proof that organic food was a waste of energy, space, and money. Proponents of organic production and consumption, however, quickly responded by arguing that health and nutritional outcomes are not the primary motivations behind organic consumption. Two days after the study was published in *The New York Times*, several medical doctors, including the director of the Occupation and Environmental Medicine Center at North Shore-LIJ Health System and the chairwoman of the Department of Population Health, responded in dissenting published letters to the editor of the paper (Letters to the Editor, 2012). These doctors contended that the Stanford study missed the point on why people should grow and buy organic food, highlighting the importance of individually avoiding pesticide ingestion and collectively minimizing environmental degradation through organic farming methods.

This prominent study exposed persistent disagreements that have surfaced among scholars and the public. As the organic industry has expanded, so have the disputes over the primary goals of organic agriculture and consumption. Indeed, some evidence suggests consumers are beginning to opt out of mainstream organic markets because of these contentious issues. There are now indications that sales in the organic industry as a whole are beginning to plateau (Hartman 2008). However, consumption of local organic foods through Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) and farmers markets has accelerated despite contention surrounding broader organic markets (Guthman 2004). Small-scale organic farms that supply local markets have multiplied in recent years to accommodate a widespread growing demand (USDA 2007 Census of Agriculture, 2009). Gradually, local organic sales have come to comprise one of the fastest growing segments of the overall food economy (Dimitri and Green 2002; USDA Agricultural Marketing Service 2013). The number of CSA programs alone in the United States expanded from an estimated 1,700 in 2007 to a documented 12,549 in 2007 (Press and Arnould 2011; Thompson and Coskuner-Balli 2007). CSA members now constitute a substantial consumer base for local organic markets. Yet, there is very little consensus in our explanation for consumers’ motivations to flock to these new ethical market venues. Do they hold narrow individual interests in mind, as the media’s response to the Stanford study suggests? Are they motivated by broader and loftier collective ideas? Or, is their consumption predicated on a blend of both?

The objective of this research is to identify the predominant motivational narratives offered by CSA members for their consumption. Using interview data I collected from over 50 CSA members for my dissertation, I plan to code, organize, analyze, and systematically construct a narrative of the emergent motivational schema in my data. This is a new line of inquiry I am pursuing that is substantially different from the research agenda of my dissertation. My interview schedule with CSA members was
split into two sections that were comprised of consumption motivations and experiences. I limited the focus of my dissertation, though, to identifying and analyzing the experience of production and consumption in local food markets. Specifically, my dissertation utilized only field and interview data that pertained to the shared meanings of authenticity and experiences of purity that producers and consumers mutually established while carving out local niche markets. Therefore, the scope of the dissertation did not include any theoretical or methodological analysis of individual or collective consumer motivations. However, I have recordings of extensive responses from over 50 interviews with CSA members regarding their motivations of consumption that have yet to be coded or analyzed. The intention of this project is to analyze this data and construct a multifaceted motivational framework that corresponds with the broad ambitions of local organic consumption.

**How does this project fit into current research in the area?**

As it currently stands, research has not come to an agreement on the primary motivations driving consumer action in new ethical market fields. These discordant findings prevent our understanding of how markets operate, what purposes they serve, and how they are likely to evolve. While the local organic sector is growing quickly, there are very few studies that have addressed the actual consumer orientations in this market sphere. Indeed, the role of consumers and consumption in general has been historically neglected in economic sociology. Most research in this field is limited to producers and the processes of production. By neglecting the motivations of consumers, economic sociology has missed crucial insights in how demand affects supply and the emergence of alternative markets. Fortunately, the field for research on consumption in sociology is just now taking root in a coordinated fashion. A new research section on Consumers and Consumption was incorporated into the American Sociological Association in 2013. Several members of this research community have initiated a series of studies that assess the dynamics of individual and collective motivations operating in consumption. Much of the research is split in its findings and argues that conscious consumers engage individualistically or collectively in mutually exclusive fashion. However, a third branch of consumer research is attempting to measure more nuanced patterns of consumption that bridge both individual and collective motivational orientations. Below, I provide a brief review of the division in literature, as well as a review of this third branch of research that synthesizes theoretical approaches. I close with a description of how my project can contribute to a more fruitful synthesis in theory and provide a clearer understanding of the broad motivations in alternative markets for local organic foods.

Many scholars dispute collective motivations are central to conscious consumption. Josee Johnston (2008) argues that ethical consumption is premised on individual concerns and self-interest. Because markets for organic foods tend to be expensive and exclusive, Johnston asserts consumption in this realm cannot be collectively motivated. Other scholars have suggested that consumption of any form in capitalism is not an effective strategy for promoting social change or collective well-being (Thompson 2011). Capitalism, after all, is an economic system designed to
generate profit solely for individuals. Similarly, Maniates (2002) claims that ethical consumption in places like local organic markets actually reduces collective outcomes and displaces real political activism. Participation in ethical consumption, according to Maniates, provides a feeling of isolated self-gratification to consumers in ways that do not require them to directly engage political or economic issues. This claim has been supported in other research that has found consumption strategies often reduce collective or political movements (Heath and Potter 2004; Guthman 2008).

Other research also disputes that consumption is driven by collective motivations. In his book *Shopping Our Way to Safety*, Andrew Szasz (2007) argues consumers are increasingly concerned with protecting their individual safety as externalized risks associated with modern life become more extensive. Instead of looking for solutions to problems, he theorizes that consumer attempt to quarantine their families from harm. Indeed, externalized collective threats are endemic in an entrenched “risk society” (Beck 1992). As the interconnections of global society grow in complexity, Beck argues institutional organizations feel compelled to become more specialized, technologically oriented, and integrated in order to manage increasing wide-scale risks. The emerging risk society has the potential to provoke people to become more individualistic and inward looking when managing collective threats. Some research on the consumption of mass marketed organic foods appears to align with Szasz’s (2007) and Beck’s (1992) theories. According to a recent study on Americans’ attitudes about organic foods, 73 percent of families report buying organic mainly for health reasons (Organic Trade Association 2009). In mass markets, families largely buy organic to boost nutritional intake and avoid the ingestion of harmful pesticides and chemicals. Few of these families attribute their purchases of mass-marketed organic food with environmental, economic, or community (in other words, collective) concerns.

Other research in consumer culture, however, suggests conscious consumption in emerging ethical markets might be based on more collective concerns. Seyfang (2006) argues that local organic consumption is primarily a reflection of growing interest in environmental sustainability. According to Seyfang, local organic consumers intentionally consume from ethical markets that emphasize ecological health. Connally and Prothero (2008) share this assessment of the collective nature of conscious consumption. Their study argues that consumption in venues like local organic markets is predicated upon a growing desire in the public to transition into a “green” economy that would benefit all inhabitants of the earth. Further, Sassatelli (2006) asserts that such consumption is motivated primarily by the desire to share responsibility in redirecting the economy away from injustice and environmental exploitation and toward collective well-being. Finally, Micheletti (2003) notes that conscious consumption is increasingly political and largely employed to generate collective action.

This theoretical bifurcation in the literature reduces the complexity of consumer action in such a way that obscures the nuances of emerging ethical markets. However, there is some evidence that suggests many conscious consumers are becoming increasingly collective and environmentally oriented as a way of projecting cultural sophistication (Carfagna et al. 2013). My hypothesis is that conscious consumers scan their environment broadly on both individual and collective terms and act with both interests in mind. There are limited studies that have attempted to bridge this individual
and collective divide, but two are worth mentioning. Using data from the General Social Survey, Willis and Schor (2012) tested the hypothesis that both individual and collective interests motivate conscious consumers. Their study suggests that conscious consumers practice an “integrated lifestyle” and carefully consider the impact of their consumption. These considerations extend from individual issues, such as personal health and quality, all the way to the effect consumption holds on the broader political economy. When it comes to local food, DeSoucey and Techoueyres (2009) echo these findings in their comparative study of production and consumption in the United States and France. Their research suggests that, internationally, the growing markets for local foods reflect a political and cultural turn among niche consumer activists. While they idealize individualistic notions of quality and taste, local market actors emphasize local purchases as a valorized and superior form of consumption that enables transparency and connection. In their collective search for “ideas of social and environmental virtue (82),” these local food activists perceive their consumer choices as a “tool that legitimizes new markets as dynamic social spaces connecting the production and consumption of culture (83).”

This proposed project fits into this third branch of research by offering qualitative insights into the motivational structures binding local organic production and consumption. By identifying individualistic and collectivistic narratives in my interviews, I will build a qualitative case of the broad and integrated consumer motivations operating in this type of alternative local market. My hypothesis is that CSA members in my interview pool are not as mutually exclusive in their motivational orientations as the literature suggests. Because CSA programs are often advertised as holistically beneficial markets for both human and environmental health, I expect these consumers will offer complex motivations satisfying a wide variety of individual and collective concerns bridged together through their consumption. This project will expand our understanding of conscientious consumption in new ethical markets and highlight ways individual and collective issues can merge in effective ways to meet diverse consumer desires.

**What methods will you use to obtain the project's objective or answer the research question?**

As part of the data collection for my dissertation, in 2011 I obtained a CSA roster from a popular 75-acre local organic farm in Southeastern Arizona. This farm utilized a standard CSA model to finance the growth of their agricultural operation with approximately 100 local investors (families, community members, schools, and a cooperative grocery store). From this CSA list I was able to conduct in-depth interviews with more than 50 of the members over the course of a 12-month period. I analyzed portions of these interviews pertaining to consumer experiences, but have additional sections pertaining to consumer motivations that have not been coded and analyzed. Upon review of the transcripts, CSA members in my study conveyed a wide array of sentiments, priorities, and values in connection to their consumer behavior. I have inductively developed and defined coding categories based on parent themes that appear
to repeatedly and frequently emerge throughout the section of interviews (Gordon 1992). Essentially, at this point I have only gathered a list of disparate stated motivations and arranged them into coherent motifs. These motifs could potentially house corresponding or related motivational themes together. I have organized sixteen inductive themes (potential coding categories) into four primary concern motifs: Quality, Cultural, Economic, and Environment (See Table 1 below). The Quality and Cultural motifs are housed under Individual Motivational categories, while the economic and environment motifs are housed under Collective Motivational categories. The goal is to identify how these categories operate in conjunction with one another.

Table 1: Potential Coding Categories of Motivation for Local Organic Consumption

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Individual Motivational Category</th>
<th>Collective Motivational Category</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Quality Motif</td>
<td>• Environmental Motif</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>o Health (Nutrition &amp; Pesticide Avoidance)</td>
<td>o Sustainability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>o Regional Character</td>
<td>o Integrative Agriculture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>o Freshness</td>
<td>o Chemical Reduction in Soil and Water Runoff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>o Taste</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Cultural Motif</td>
<td>• Economic Motif</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>o Nostalgia</td>
<td>o Support for Local Economy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>o Authenticity</td>
<td>o Interpersonal Markets</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>o Distinction</td>
<td>o Transparency</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

I have not yet coded any of the interview data into these themes or motifs. Over the summer I will load my transcripts into NVivo 10, a software program for qualitative data analysis. For the initial procedure I will identify sections of the interviews that correspond with inductive themes. The coding process first requires the analyst to match self-expressed motivational statements with these themes. Each coded section of text will be given a thematic marking that will eventually serve as network node for the primary motivations elicited by CSA respondents. This is a time consuming process. For example, when asked to describe some of the main motivations for joining a CSA program, the interviewees often offered lengthy 2-3 minute responses based on extensive personal reflection that comprised a wide variety of considerations. At first glance, many of these statements appear unrelated and overly complex. However, the coding process in sophisticated software allows the researcher to go through the transcript line by line and identify themes that can be attached to parent categories or subcategories, and how they relate to one another. Within NVivo, the researcher has capacity to connect disparate themes both within a single transcript, but also across a large number of other transcripts, as nodes in a network. What emerges is a complicated web of connected primary themes that is otherwise invisible. The software builds together the hidden
thematic connections and creates a visualization of the coded nodes in the network, thus shining light on complex qualitative meanings.

It is highly likely that during the initial coding process I will identify new themes and/or motifs. If this occurs, I will need to readjust my categorical schemata, and rearticulate how nodes might be housed under multiple parent themes and motifs. Because respondents discuss their consumer behavior in rich detail, often their statements will satisfy multiple codes simultaneously and require an updated rubric for precision. Fortunately, one of my goals in this coding process is to identify how the consumption behavior of CSA members is motivated by multiple overlapping individual and collective concerns. With complex and detailed responses I have the capacity to specifically identify the predominant narrative shared by consumers in this case study.

What activities are planned and outcomes do you expect? How will the results be disseminated?

I intend to produce a publishable paper for a scholarly journal appropriate for this topic, such as The Journal of Consumer Culture, The Journal of Consumer Behavior, or The Journal of Sociology of Agriculture and Food. Further, a draft of a paper pertaining to this research in progress has been accepted for presentation at the 2014 Annual Meeting of the American Sociological Association’s (ASA) section on Consumers and Consumption in San Francisco, California. In the long term, I intend on incorporating this research and analysis into a book based upon my dissertation.

What qualifications do you bring to the position as grant director?

I received my Ph.D. in sociology in the summer of 2013 from the University of Arizona and passed my comprehensive preliminary exams in Culture and Economic Sociology with honors. My scholarly work focuses on the cultural dimensions of consumption from local and global perspectives. In 2012, I participated in a research-in-progress presentation of this project in a section on Social Movements at the March 23, Annual Pacific Sociological Association Meeting in Reno, Nevada. Further, I have spent considerable time researching individualism and collectivism in other substantive fields. In a paper I co-authored in 2011, I analyzed various ways Protestants and Catholics diverge in their understanding of individual and collective tensions that surface in markets.

What previous grants (IUSB and external) have you received, what resulted from those projects?

I have received two grants from the University of Arizona that facilitated my data collection and completion of dissertation research. In 2011 I received $800 from the Social and Behavioral Sciences Research Institute at the University of Arizona, which enabled me to purchase recording equipment and software for transcription and qualitative coding of interviews with Community Supported Agriculture members in this market field. During the summer of 2013 I received the School of Behavior Science
Ph.D. Completion Fellowship at the University of Arizona for the amount of $3,700. This fellowship allowed me to complete my dissertation during my transition from graduate school to a faculty member of the Department of Sociology and Anthropology at Indiana University South Bend.

What efforts are underway to obtain additional funding for this project?

At this time, I have not sought any additional funding for this project. However, I intend to apply for a grant from North Central Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education for Consumer Research in August 2014 that could potentially fund research on effective marketing strategies for sustainable farming.

Budget

I am requesting support for two months during the summer of 2013. The grant will allow me to utilize this time to code and analyze my interview data and write up the results for publication. The budget details are as follows:

FRG Salary $6,693; Fringes $1,807 for a total request of $8,500
Work Cited


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