

# Food, Ethics and Community: Using Cultural Animation to Develop a Food Vision for North Staffordshire

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## Introduction

Eating ethically involves a plethora of activities, being both a contingent and a challenging practice (Williams *et al.*, 2015). The desire to be more ethical in our food choices is connected to anxieties over food consumption, including how and what we should be eating (Ashley *et al.*, 2004), the conditions of production and distribution, highlighted through various food scares from BSE to horse meat in burgers (Jackson, 2010) and the amount of food that gets wasted in the process (Evans, 2014). Such are the range of issues that it becomes hard for consumers to identify a precise focus for the anxiety beyond a general 'lack of confidence in food' (Osowski *et al.*, 2012:58) with the result that they feel unsure as to how to respond (Benson, 1997).

Individualistic, choice focused narratives of responsible eating remain dominant in food discourses which make structural inequalities opaque and obscure the impact media and food corporations have on what is desirable and legitimate in terms of food interventions and ethical food consumption (Goodman *et al.*, 2017). Such narratives see individual behaviour as both the source of and the solution to existing food system problems (Johnson and Cairns, 2012). The ideal food choices inscribed in these narratives are socially and culturally mediated, hiding the power struggles over the regimes of truth that underpin the social construction of individual responsibility, healthy food and ethical food consumption. By focusing on the individual, they miss out the communal, socially negotiated and culturally informed experiences of people's relations with food.

In this paper we explore a communal grassroots food initiative spearheaded by a community food network from Staffordshire in collaboration with a local university and an award winning theatre. The members of this network are not experts with authority to speak about food to or on behalf of the community. If anything, they are typically the unheard voices in any institutional narratives about food and their stories would be hidden at the deep end of the biopolitical nexus of food ethics (Goodman *et al.*, 2017). It is to these untold stories we turn to in this discussion piece for we believe that grassroots initiatives and experiences such as these have the potential to bridge individual and state driven interventions of food consumption and go beyond individualistic choice driven food narratives.

The North Staffordshire Community Food Network (subsequently referred to as the 'Food Network') was formed in 2014 following an EPSRC grant on food poverty held by Keele University's Community Animation and Social

Innovation Centre (CASIC) in collaboration with the outreach department of a local theatre, New Vic Borderlines. The grant brought together individuals and groups from North Staffordshire who were concerned or involved with issues of food poverty and healthy eating/living. Subsequent to the research, members of the community came together to form the Food Network to develop the connections made and build on the discussions that evolved during the project. The Food Network has since received funding from the Public Health Department at Stoke-on-Trent City Council and formed as an unincorporated association with an agreed constitution. CASIC researchers and administrators provided support in the early stages of its development while New Vic Borderlines offered the theatre as a meeting space and their facilitation skills to run various events.

CASIC (<https://www.keele.ac.uk/casic/>) is a multi-disciplinary research centre that aims to foster community-based research via creative and artistic means of engagement. Through a series of AHRC, ESRC and EPSRC funded research projects between 2012 and 2018, CASIC researchers developed, in collaboration with New Vic Borderlines' theatre practitioners, a distinct methodology of knowledge co-creation and community engagement, entitled 'Cultural Animation' (CA). We argue in this commentary paper that the Food Network evolved due to this particular way of working and furthermore, that the network members themselves bought into this methodology and used it to collaboratively develop a food vision for their local area.

We start by giving a brief introduction to the area to contextualize the economic and social conditions in which the Food Network was set up and explain the process by which the membership created a food vision. We then provide further detail about the methodology of Cultural Animation before discussing how it was employed in the initial development of the food vision. We conclude by highlighting some of the limitations of the methodology and suggest how cultural animation could be used in other areas of food ethics and consumption research.

## Food, health and Stoke-on-Trent

North Staffordshire is a conurbation in the North West of England surrounding the city of Stoke-on-Trent. According to Public Health England (2017), Stoke-on-Trent is one of the 20% most deprived districts/unitary authorities in England and has about 28% (14,400) of children living in low income families. Health inequalities within the area remain high with life expectancy being 9.3 years lower for men and 7.1 years lower for women in the most deprived areas of the city than in the least deprived areas. 22.7% of children are classified as obese, worse than the average for England while levels of teenage pregnancy, GCSE attainment, breastfeeding initiation and smoking are also worse than the England average.

Despite such negative health indicators, Stoke-on-Trent is one of the fastest growing local economies (JSNA report, 2015). The same report states that in 2015 unemployment levels were at pre-recession levels (9,000 persons). Nevertheless, unemployment in Stoke remains above national rates: 7.5% compared with 6.2% nationally. The City's successful bid to create one of the UK's 26 enterprise zones, i.e. the Stoke on Trent Ceramic Valley Enterprise Zone, will create 9,000 new jobs and rejuvenate 140 hectares of brownfield land as well as ensure sustainable economic growth by harnessing existing manufacturing know how and creative skills in the area. In addition to pursuing economic

resilience, the city is investing in numerous community initiatives focused on education, music, sports, local heritage, health and food. Of relevance to the discussion here is one of these community initiatives which aims to develop the City of Stoke-on-Trent into a sustainable food city. To progress this initiative the City Council chose to collaborate with the Food Network, a collaboration that was enabled and facilitated by Cultural Animation Methodologies of engagement and knowledge co-production to which we turn in the next section.

## Cultural Animation

Cultural animation (CA) was developed as a methodology of community engagement more than 15 years ago by Sue Moffat, Director of New Vic Borderlines. As a result of collaborating with CASIC academics on various research projects, the approach evolved to also become a methodology of knowledge co-production underpinned by an American Pragmatist philosophy (for a detailed discussion see Lorino 2018). In a nutshell American Pragmatism sees thinking and acting as two sides of the same coin: to think means to experience the world and not accounting for this experience means escaping into abstract and useless theory. To act meaningfully in the world is itself an act of thinking and reflection (Kelemen and Hamilton, 2018).

Since 2013, CA has been used in a broad range of research projects including community leadership (Kelemen *et al.*, 2017), volunteering, disaster recovery (Goulding *et al.*, 2017), marketplace exclusion (Burgess *et al.*, 2017), food poverty and health in the community (Kelemen *et al.*, 2018) both in the UK and overseas (Japan, Canada, Greece and the Philippines). CA is located within the broader field of creative methods and its main aim is to create safe spaces in which dialogue can take place and new relationships between diverse parties can be formed (Goulding *et al.*, 2017). Drama, music, poetry, art-making and other creative activities are the practical vehicles by which participants become involved in a process of collaborative learning and sharing. Within this process, a central role is played by the 'cultural animator', best described as a facilitator, who helps participants advance personal and collective views about past and present circumstances as well as imagine futures in which they could play a more central role (Kelemen and Hamilton, 2018).

In the collaborative activities participants focus on tasks which require little or no formal skills/training. They have the opportunity to discuss, dispute or share meanings for themselves rather than bow to the academic's privilege of abstracting accounts on their behalf (Kelemen *et al.*, 2017). By giving equal status to academic expertise, practical skills, common-sense intelligence and the relevance of day-to-day experiences, CA views knowing and doing as deeply interconnected. Although CA aims to dissolve boundaries (between theory and practice, between knowing and doing, between expertise and practical skill), it also acknowledges that boundaries are inescapable on numerous levels - between researcher and researched, between differing academic traditions and positions, between academics and practitioners and between people of different cultures and language. However, it is important to recognise them and work to break them down at least on a temporary basis through a collaborative process that encourages intimacy, honesty and recognition of power differentials (Spaniol 2005). One powerful way in which such distinctions can be transgressed is via the use of boundary objects. Star and Griesmer (1989) introduced the notion of 'boundary objects' as

objects that facilitate communication among diverse actors who hold different viewpoints and knowledge. Represented in CA by ordinary objects such as cups, mugs, plates, buttons, fabric, ribbons etc, these collaborative artifacts (Carlsen *et al.* 2014) help individuals taking part in CA workshops to express their ideas and emotions without necessarily resorting to specialist language. In so doing, they level the playing field ensuring that academic expertise, practice-based expertise and lived experience are valued equally.

CA shares some similarities with Participatory Action Research (PAR) (Chevalier and Buckles, 2013). Indeed, inquiry arises out of, and its results feed back into, the practical activity concerned while its ethos is egalitarian and participative. However, unlike PAR, CA is more explicit about its knowledge co-production agenda and it employs primarily creative arts based techniques to enact it and affect change.

## Cultural Animation Workshop: Developing a Sustainable Food Vision for North Staffordshire

The one day workshop took place in 2016 and included over 50 participants comprising policy makers, charities, academics, NGO's, community groups and the public. The participants were recruited by the Food Network with help from New Vic Borderlines and the event was held at the New Vic Theatre. The morning session was facilitated by the first author and consisted of a number of invited community speakers from the UK and abroad who highlighted their involvement with food and the challenges and successes of various projects they had been involved in. The aim was to inspire and challenge participants to think carefully about the future of food in the local area.

The afternoon session consisted of a CA workshop, comprising three distinct activities facilitated by the fourth author and her team of theatre practitioners from New Vic Borderlines. Having heard about the experience of others, these activities were specifically developed to facilitate the creation of a food vision for the North Staffordshire area including Stoke-On-Trent. Participants were split into three groups and remained in these for each of the activities.

For the first activity, groups were asked to map the current local food environment using colourful buttons of different shapes and sizes and similar small items. One group described their food map as comprising distinct 'silos', groups that worked on food matters in isolation rather than collectively. Similarly, another group explained that the pink and red buttons in their picture were the 'experts' and the gold buttons were "STP's". The group explained that this stood for 'the same ten people', members of the community - the same core group, the ones who willingly and repeatedly undertook activities for the benefit of the wider community.

The subsequent group discussion suggested the existence of many problems, slow progress, missed opportunities and connections along with the desire to do something different. The participants discussed the opportunities that existed for change but also the frustrations experienced in progressing these.



Figure 1 – Cultural Animation activity, mapping the food environment with buttons

For the second CA activity, the groups were asked to use ordinary items (boundary objects) that the theatre practitioners had placed in the centre of the room to create a picture depicting the food future that they would like to see for the local area. Each member of the group selected an item and presented it to the remaining group members explaining what it represented to them. As an example, one individual selected an umbrella, explaining that it is important to have protection when you ‘don’t know what’s coming’; another selected a camera, which could be used to collect stories of the ways in which people worked together. Someone else selected a net, which they displayed fully stretched out across the wooden frames. They explained that ‘throwing out the net’ was a central part of their future vision, catching and helping those in need but also allowing connections and bonds to be made.

The final CA activity required participants to draw on the discussions and reflections from the first two activities to create a collective food vision. To encourage them to distil what had been wide ranging discussions into a clear message, each group was asked to develop and present a cinquain (a poem comprising five lines) and a haiku (a Japanese short poem of 17 syllables shared between three lines). The cinquain poems have a defined format: the first line contains one word (the title), the second line has two words that describe the title, the third line contains feelings associated with the title, the fourth line has four words which are actions required to make the title happen and the final line contains a single word which is an alternative word for the title. In a haiku, the first line contains five syllables, the second seven and the third five. The cinquains and haikus were then performed by the groups via human tableaux using objects from the selection in the room.



One of the groups produced the haiku below:

*Creating a noise*

*Shine a light to show the way*

*Dreaming together*

The group drew on the items and messages that formed part of their picture in the second activity to focus on a food vision. The beam of the torch was used to describe the way in which they wanted to focus attention on food matters and a mug which they chose to use as a drum, made the noise and created the rhythm for change that caught the attention of fellow citizens.

The Haiku of another of the groups was also a call to arms:

*Change the way we think*

*Make things happen don't hold back*

*Do it together!*

This rallying cry was an explicit message designed to go beyond 'the same ten people' and increase involvement. It is this collective responsibility, a broadening of participation that was seen as central in this particular food vision.

In producing their cinquians, participants were asked to reflect on the change that was needed to move towards their desired food future. The first group emphasised the theme of harmony that can only be achieved through fairness and sharing, as seen in the cinquain below.

*Enough*

*Needs satisfied*

*Rooted healthy fair*

*Growing evolving including sharing*

*Harmony*

The second group saw the possibility of the journey from poverty to wealth by transforming the individual story of poverty into a community story of connections, empowerment, education and support.

*Poverty*

*Need vulnerable*

*Hungry anxious lonely*

*Connecting empowering educating supporting*

*Wealth*

## Discussion: Food, Ethics and Community

We began this piece with assertions that individuals are experiencing ‘an age of anxiety’ (Jackson, 2010:147) when it comes to food consumption. Participants in our workshop certainly articulated some of these anxieties and concerns in their depictions of their current food worlds. They also outlined some of their frustrations in finding ways to address their anxieties. Some of these came from their own experiences as consumers but also from their attempts to address these issues collectively through involvement in communal food projects.

Our experience in working with the Food Network to produce a food vision for North Staffordshire highlights the potential of CA to contribute to the field of ethical food consumption. The CA techniques used in the workshops encouraged all participants to experiment with new ways of working together, promoting collaboration, collective learning and respect for difference and diversity in imagining a shared vision for food in their local area.

The CA methodology facilitated genuine engagement with the theme by stimulating a variety of contributions from the participants in both narrative and visual/experiential formats. The participants contributed as much or as little as they felt able to and in whichever format they felt comfortable with. This led to a sense of openness and fun in which the focus was on listening and sharing rather than judging.

By employing CA, deep beliefs as well as insights into what is possible were revealed. Reflections on what had been lost were then focused on the future and what could be changed. CA enabled research participants to articulate personal and communal ambitions with regards to the ethical consumption of food and create a common agenda for change in a collaborative bottom up fashion.

While, as far as we were aware, all participants were comfortable with the CA methodology, there are however limitations: as we argued earlier, not all boundaries can be dissolved and some participants may find it difficult to open up in front of strangers or to respond creatively to the tasks set by the facilitator. Academics may also find it difficult to accept the forms of knowledge co-created in this process as valid and rigorous. The immersion in such processes can be uplifting for some, while others may find it daunting and emotionally challenging.

Despite such limitations, we hope to have illustrated through the vignettes presented here, the potential of Cultural Animation to stimulate knowledge co-production practices that lead to self-reflection as well as to collaborative action in the field of ethical food consumption. Further studies could focus on how to harness the creativity of individuals who, for various reasons, are excluded from the market place by bringing their experiences to the fore in order to tackle deprivation and poverty in marginalised sections of society. CA techniques could also be applied to studies of food consumption, consumer understanding of food labour processes and sustainable food production and supply chains by encouraging a bottom up understanding of the ethics surrounding such processes which is currently missing in the literature.

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## Biographies

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