I was in Paraguay. I was barefoot, and I was frustrated. So was Epifanio, my 13-year-old neighbor. To him, planting beans shouldn’t be this hard. He took a deep breath and told me to watch his feet.

Epifanio straddled the freshly tilled row of red dirt and slowly (for my benefit) picked up his right foot. He then knifed his toe into the center of the mounded soil, creating a two-inch depression. Returning to his wide stance, he plucked a seed from the makeshift T-shirt basket folded against his abdomen. He dropped the seed in the hole and picked up his left foot. With a sweeping motion, he covered the seed and patted it down. He looked over his shoulder as if to say, “Got it?” I responded with a half-hearted iporã—Guarani for “good” or “okay”—and watched him as he picked up the pace. I tried to memorize the sequence: right foot, toe punch, seed drop; left foot, sweep, pat; repeat. Sounds simple, right?

This was one food-related puzzle I never solved. Fifteen years later, it still bugs me.

That afternoon in 2001, Epifanio finished three rows before I was halfway through my first. Later, I learned that his older brother went back that evening and re-planted my row altogether. I left Paraguay two years later after finishing my stint in the Peace Corps. When I returned to the United States, I shelved my interest in food and agriculture.

Between then and now, I became a sociologist. My job is to teach students how to analyze social phenomena. Like Epifanio, I try to teach by example; showing them how a sociologist conducts research in the field.

One of those research projects was a 10-year study of workers who help victims of domestic violence. Why do people choose to do such emotionally draining work? I wondered? By 2014, I had answered that question—and the questions it provoked—as best I could, culminating in my book, *Moral Wages: The Emotional Dilemmas of Victim Advocacy and Counseling*. When 2014 became 2015, I realized it was time to formulate a new question that could lead to a different quest. I’m not sure if it was the nagging sensation that I could have—should have—learned more in Paraguay. Maybe it was the desire to research something more simple and basic. Maybe it was memories of Epifanio. Whatever the reason, I felt drawn back to the issue that had been the sole focus of my life in South America and a lingering one in my life beyond it: food.
mericans have a paradoxical relationship with food. Food insecurity is real, but few people in this country die from not having enough. Instead, the opposite is true: The health of many people suffers as a result of consuming too much food, or more accurately, too much unhealthy food. We have come to a strange point in our history: Those who have the least weigh the most. According to James Larino of the Mayo Clinic, Americans living in the 10 poorest counties are 34 percent more likely to be obese—and 60 percent more likely to have diabetes—than those living in the 10 wealthiest counties.

How did it come to this? What is the relationship between poverty, food access, and health? And would getting at the foundation of these problems prove foundational in solving the many societal challenges an unhealthy diet influences? I may not have been able to plant beans with my bare feet, but answering these questions was something I was trained to do.

I am not the first to tackle this subject, of course. For the past 25 years, researchers have produced an entire subfield of scholarship on what are called “food deserts.” Coined in the 1990s, the term “food desert” refers to neighborhoods with high rates of poverty, low rates of access to transportation, and few grocery stores. The USDA has very precise definitions for urban and rural settings, but the basic concept is clear: Poor people—often without cars—are having trouble getting healthy food because none is being sold near them. What these areas have instead are the cheaper and unhealthy foods we know we should avoid: fast-food outlets and convenience stores.

Over the years, as the scholarship has evolved, it has become conventional wisdom among public health scholars that a lack of access to good food is a significant contributor to the poor health of impoverished neighborhoods. To fix the problem, a number of initiatives have been put in motion.

First, there was a movement to subsidize grocery store construction in underserved areas. Then, public health programs began teaching convenience stores to feature fresher items. Soon after, nonprofits started educating consumers on how to purchase and prepare healthier items. More recently, community leaders have cut the middleman and gotten farmers to sell directly to neighborhoods via mobile farmer’s markets and urban farms.

In the past decade, hundreds of millions of dollars in the form of governmental tax credits, grants, loans, and guarantees have been put toward solving the food desert problem. New grocery stores have broken ground. Bodega owners have put bananas by the register. Crisp lettuce is being trucked to street corners, where it hasn’t been sold in decades.

These initiatives haven’t all come from taxpayer money. The private sector has played a significant role. Major retailers like Walgreens and Wal-Mart have pledged to increase offerings of healthier items at existing stores and build new locations in less affluent areas.

Together, academics, politicians, and policymakers have put together solid proposals, and through public and private campaigns, educational programs, and alternative distribution models, success looked like it was right around the corner. It all seemed so obvious: If we made affordable, culturally appropriate, healthy food available in these neighborhoods, people would change the way they eat.

But it hasn’t worked out that way. As it turns out, getting people to eat better involves more than just building grocery stores near them.

The first hint of this was made clear in a Philadelphia study after a new supermarket had been built in a food desert. The supermarket was lauded as improving access to fresh fruits and vegetables to an estimated 500,000 children and adults. The only problem was that making something available to someone didn’t guarantee that they would use it.

To measure the effectiveness of putting the Philadelphia store in the middle of a food desert, Steven Cummins, a public health scholar who has studied food deserts for 15 years, surveyed residents before and after the grocery store opened to see if any changes occurred. The first indications were positive. More than half the residents in the area reported shopping at the store after it opened, and those living near the store also reported feeling like they had more choice when it came to fruits and vegetables. These changes in perception did not lead to changes in diet, however. In his report, Cummins found that “few residents adopted the new supermarket as their main food store, and exposure to it had no statistically significant impact on [body mass index] or daily fruit and vegetable intake.”

In 2012, a study of schoolchildren’s diets in California found a similar pattern. In that investigation, parents were asked to report all the different kinds of food their children had eaten the day before. The questions were relatively simple, like, “How many glasses of milk did your child drink yesterday?” The researchers also knew where these families lived, so they could count how many supermarkets and fast food outlets were within a 10- or 20-minute walk of their houses. What they found was that kids who lived closer to grocery stores were not fed significantly healthier foods than kids who lived farther away. Similarly, kids who lived closer to fast-food chains did not eat more fast food, either.

Both these studies called into question one of the central premises of the food desert debate—namely, that geography determines diet. Unfortunately, when it comes to food, we aren’t always rational beings.

This point was made clear in a 2013 study by public health investigators in Pittsburgh about how and where food deserts residents shopped. They found that only 24 percent of neighborhood residents shopped at their nearest full-service grocery store. The rest traveled nearly twice as far to shop at other grocery stores or specialty shops.

What began to dawn on me were two things: One, when it comes to distance and quality food, we may need to rethink our assumptions; and two, that rethinking should start where my interest in the subject had begun in the first place.
my first job was to plant beans. I knew the right people who do the planting, pruning, and picking. Surely, they would be able to provide critical insights. To find those out, I knew I had to talk to the farmers. Nutritional scholars have gone to great lengths to determine the truth about the health benefits of eating fresh produce. But, most of all, they want to do something with their lives that is as meaningful as it is simple: grow food.

How does this play into the food desert problem?

Farms like Greenbrier are often mentioned as the solution to the problem. But, some farmers assume such small-scale farming. I learned that many organic farmers are equipped to do small-scale organic farming can deliver a product of exquisite quality. One morning at Greenbrier, working alongside Steve and Harry, I selectively cut leaves of organic collards with a short, serrated harvest knife. We bunched them by hand to assure uniform size and quality. When we finished, we placed them in a tub filled with cold water right by the field. We gently boxed them up, cool and crisp.

We started at sunrise. By sunset, they were being plated at a farm-to-table restaurant in downtown Greenville. Local farms like Greenbrier can do incredible things like this, but this was labor-intensive, small-scale, organic farming as it is done in the United States today. Steve, Harry, and I did this for three years of research on urban food environments.

In response to this reality, in March of 2015, the USDA awarded $31 million in grants to subsidize innovative solutions like “double up farm” programs. These programs are designed to give low-income shoppers and mobile farmers that would bring produce to the people. Focus groups of participants in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) in an urban community in Oklahoma, those I spoke with, found that the farmers’ markets were still perceived as too expensive and impractical to do to all of their business in one place. Mobile farmers’ markets addressed some of these concerns, but they were still a seasonal enterprise. Even if they work, they end at the end of the season.

If these ideas—which looked so good on paper—failed, how might they be adjusted to foster real solutions? Those answers, I believed, could be found by taking the next step in my research: bringing the knowledge I had learned at the farm to those we talk about when we talk about food deserts—the people who live in them. People come from all over upstate South Carolina to see the beauty of Greenbrier. Weddings reserve their clovered fields a year in advance and chefs rent their kitchen to host “farm to fork” dinners. Visiting the farm is a way for consumers to see the origins of their food without a cellophane filter. The venue is both a work place and a local laboratory.

When customers come to Greenbrier’s stall at a farmer’s market, they want more than just an heirloom tomato; they want its backstory. It is not only the food itself that draws people to these farmers’ markets, but the place and a local laboratory. The Hatfield Transplanter is an impressive—yet simple—piece of mechanical ingenium. A V-shaped device, it is operated by two, waist-high, bicycle-grip handles. The user drives it into the ground to cut a perfectly square dirt. This was Steve’s job. A 20-year-old intern at Greenbrier, he found working on a farm much more rewarding than his previous landscaping job, where he spent 10 hours a day on the wheeling end of a Weedwacker or with a four-gallon sprayer filled with Roundup strapped to his back.

My job was to follow Steve with a bucket of fishy-smelling chemical-free fertilizer. Inside the transplanter is a long funnel, and after Steve punched it into the ground, I poured a quarter cup of black grains down its funnel. From there, Steve would move 18 inches down the row, and Harry—his earbuds buzzing music from his smartphone—would plant a seed and tamp soft dirt on top of it. Technically, it was possible to drop a seed or seedling down the transplanter’s shoot, but sometimes they get stuck or planted too deeply. If you have enough time and people, it’s a job better done by hand.

One seed, three people. Epiphany might have been surprised, but this labor-intensive, small-scale, organic farming as it is done in the United States today. Steve, Harry, and I did this for three years. I didn’t screw up too often.

I spent two more weeks working full time at Greenbrier. In the middle of a stretch of summer heat, I came back and did another week. Last fall, I visited one last time to see how they were wrapping up the season. During my stays, I tried my hand at everything they would let me do. I fed pigs, corralled cattle, drove tomato stakes, and labeled seedlings. I learned that much of the work of local farms like Greenbrier does not take place on dirt. Organic farms like Greenbrier are often mentioned as the solution to the food desert problem, but how do they adjust to foster real solutions? These answers, I believed, could be found by taking the next step in my research: bringing the knowledge I had learned at the farm to those we talk about when we talk about food deserts—the people who live in them.

A NEW STORY ABOUT OUR VALUES

ECONOMIC MODEL TO MATCH A NEW STORY ABOUT OUR VALUES

ULTIMATELY WHAT WE NEED IS AN ECONOMIC MODEL TO MATCH A NEW STORY ABOUT OUR VALUES AROUND FOOD AND HEALTH.
When you talk to real people grappling with food access issues, decisions about making meals at home aren’t theoretical exercises. They are grounded in practicality. For a family of four, a big meal (with a round of leftovers) that can fill eight bowls over two days is worth the effort involved in arranging a trip to the grocery store and spending an hour at the sink washing dishes. For someone living alone, though, the traditional supermarket model of cooking at home may no longer apply.

Food preparation works best when you can divide the labor. One person brings home the groceries, the other stores them in the cupboards. One person cooks, the other cleans. When you live alone, you do it all. When I interviewed Rene Blanton, the vice president of the Southernside neighborhood association, she explained how her mealtime decisions mostly revolved around the obligations of her job. The appeal of leftovers waned if she knew that lunch would be offered at a training session the next day. Conversely, passing a grocery store on the way to an off-site meeting might spark ideas about a meal to cook that night. When deciding whether to cook at home or eat out, she explained distance wasn’t the primary issue. It would all depend on how busy I had been at work.

Financial constraints were often the reason for ordering in, especially if someone was busy with work. This is what scholars of the food desert miss when they don’t search on food systems is funded by The Duke Endowment and The David K. Shi Center for Sustainability. do the same by mincing and measuring on-site and on-demand. If we want people to eat healthy, we need them to see that they can make filling meals from simple, non-processed ingredients. And if we want them to make a regular practice of it, we need to reset the economy of scale of home cooking.

It’s a fallacy that busy people don’t have time to cook; rather, it’s the shopping and the chopping and the planning that take up the bulk of their efforts. The actual number of minutes spent sautéing and simmering is only a fraction of all that is involved with meal preparation. To get people to start making their own meals, we need to trim the fat from the long list of tasks of cooking, making it efficient enough so that their plans to cook dinner at home don’t get derailed the next time they have to stay late at the office. Doing so would acknowledge that our problem with food is not just that we are starved for healthy options, but that we are starved for time.

Reducing prices and shrinking distances is not enough, we’ve got to find a way to speed up the process. That is the pathway to healthier eating: first show people it is possible given the time they have, and then ask them to look for ways to make more time for it.

Lastly, and most importantly, if we want to solve the food desert problem for those most at risk, we’ve got to spend more time talking to the people who live in them and the people who grow the food they eat. Both have a rhythm to their lives that involves more than just proximity and price. Eating, after all, is a pattern—perhaps the most primal one of our lives. It is a drumbeat that taps in relation to our work, our home, our families, and our geographic location. We can’t expect to understand it by asking people to fill out a quick survey.

Epifanio had a rhythm. I thought I could replicate it in an afternoon. I couldn’t. Years of muscle memory can’t be acquired that fast. Now I know to be patient. Now I know it will take years. And it all starts with a simple question, “When was the last time you cooked a meal?”

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