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The Cost of Free Assistance: Why Low-Income Individuals Do Not Access Food Pantries

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Non-governmental free food assistance is available to many low-income Americans through food pantries. However, most do not use this assistance, even though it can be worth over \$2,000 per year. Survey research suggests concrete barriers, such as lack of information, account for non-use. In contrast, qualitative studies focus on the role of cultural factors, such as stigma. Drawing on interviews with 53 low-income individuals in San Francisco who did not use food pantries, we reconcile these findings by illustrating how the two types of barriers are connected. Reasons for non-use such as need, information, long lines, and food quality were rooted in respondents' subjective understandings of those for whom the service was intended, those perceived to use the service, and the service's respect for the community. Increasing non-profit service utilization requires attention to how potential users relate seemingly objective barriers to subjective interpretations.

Key words: poverty, food pantries, food assistance, service use, nonprofits

Hunger is a substantial problem in the United States. More

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than one in seven households in the country is "food insecure," meaning that the household had difficulty providing food for all of its members at some time during the year due to a lack of resources. Levels of food insecurity rose by approximately 30% between 2007 and 2012 (Coleman-Jensen, Nord, & Singh, 2013). Food assistance programs aim to combat hunger and food insecurity. In addition to government food assistance, such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, previously food stamps), nonprofit food assistance forms a critical part of the social safety net by distributing food directly to people who choose to access it. This nonprofit assistance includes local food pantries, typically supplied by central warehouses known as food banks, which distribute groceries at churches, community centers, and other neighborhood sites.

Food pantries are a ubiquitous, yet underutilized source of food for households in need. Reflecting the increasing role of local nonprofits in social service provision, food pantries emerged in the 1980s to play a key role in providing food assistance, following the reduction of government food benefits during the Reagan administration (Daponte & Bade, 2006). Nearly 34,000 food pantries operate nationwide (Tiehen, 2002), and increasing numbers of people are turning to food pantries for assistance (U.S. Conference of Mayors, 2012; Weinfield et al., 2014). For low-income households struggling to put food on the table, this assistance might seem like a clear benefit, yet most in this situation do not avail themselves of it. According to a recent national study by Nord, Andrews, and Carlson (2006), 78% of food-insecure households, and 71% of those with very low food security, did not receive food from a food pantry. Even among food-insecure households that knew of a food pantry, 67% did not use it.

As the value of this free food assistance can exceed \$2,000 a year, food pantry non-use is a puzzle with serious policy and social welfare implications. Understanding why individuals decline local nonprofit assistance such as food pantries despite financial need is critical to serving people via the increasingly privatized and localized social safety net (Allard, 2009).

This article uses qualitative interview data from 53 low-income non-users of food pantries to investigate why some low-income households do not utilize free food assistance in

their communities. We extend previous research on nonprofit service use, and food pantry use more specifically. Survey research finds that non-users typically say they do not need food pantry services, do not know about it, or cannot physically access it. In contrast, qualitative research focuses on the stigma non-users associate with nonprofit services. Our study resolves this apparent contradiction by highlighting how subjective, cultural understandings shape respondents' conceptions of concrete, "objective" impediments.

Conceptualizing Non-use of Nonprofit Food Assistance

Despite the availability of government and nonprofit food assistance, many needy people do not use it. Although SNAP take-up rates have increased in recent years, more than one-fifth of those eligible in fiscal year 2011 did not receive benefits (Cunningham, 2014). Even of those receiving SNAP in the previous year, 52% continue to be food insecure (Coleman-Jensen et al., 2013). Moreover, when facing hardship, most households receive little to no assistance from nonprofits (Guo, 2010; Wu & Eamon, 2007). Although calculating a precise take-up rate of nonprofit assistance is difficult, there exists a population in need that is not receiving services. Why not?

Most research focuses on government programs such as SNAP (Blank & Ruggles, 1996; Issar, 2010; Ratcliffe, McKernan, & Finegold, 2008), but nonprofit assistance is different in ways that likely impact reasons for non-use. First, research on government assistance programs, such as SNAP, Medicaid, and childcare subsidies, focuses on the transaction costs of complex eligibility requirements, paperwork, and administrative hassles (Coe, 1983; Currie, 2006; Daponte, Sanders, & Taylor, 1999; Gordon, Kaestner, Korenman, & Abner, 2011; Martin, Cook, Rogers, & Joseph, 2003; Remler & Glied, 2003; Shlay, Weinraub, Harmon, & Tran, 2004). These barriers are typically absent or much reduced in nonprofit assistance like food pantries. Additionally, unlike SNAP, which gives people a near-cash benefit to be utilized at grocery stores alongside those not using assistance, nonprofit assistance provides food that users must pick up at a particular place and time. Therefore, perceptions of the space and its associated clientele may be more central in decision-making around nonprofit assistance.

Survey research focuses primarily on logistical barriers to government and nonprofit food assistance, such as reported lack of need for food; lack of information or knowledge about assistance; and lack of access, including transportation issues (Coe 1983; Currie, 2006; Daponte et al., 1998; Daponte et al., 1999; Duffy et al., 2002; Martin et al., 2003). However, this research does not consider the meaning of these barriers to potential service users. For example, what constitutes lack of need, and how do individuals define those in need as opposed to not in need? We argue that concrete, seemingly objective barriers are rooted in subjective judgments. Thus, a full understanding of these barriers must take into account how individuals define and construct these concepts. As Kissane's (2003, 2012) research shows, perceptions of need for social services may be subjective, anchored by self-perceptions, perceptions of users, and one's understanding of the purpose of private assistance.

Qualitative research can help us probe the subjective meanings attached to concrete barriers. Although little research focuses specifically on food pantry utilization, qualitative research on service use finds that potential users feel using social services is stigmatizing, humiliating, and shameful (Dodds, Ahlulwalie, & Baligh, 1996; Edin & Lein, 1997; Fothergill, 2003; Kissane, 2003, 2012; Sherman, 2013). Low-income individuals want to distance themselves from service users, whom they view as dependent and needy. This work largely focuses on how nonprofit use is stigmatized due to perceptions that it violates broader American cultural ideals of self-sufficiency and independence. Some research shows how stigma also relates to the context and experience of social services. A survey of patients at community health centers in 10 states found an association between the length of time individuals waited at the welfare office and feelings that the welfare office treats people with disrespect (Stuber & Schlesinger, 2006). Currie (2006) suggests that lengthy applications requesting personal information may increase stigma associated with means-tested government programs. Such relationships between stigma and program context should be explored as they relate to nonprofit services.

As the qualitative research suggests, cultural attitudes about service use are important to understanding

decision-making. Yet this diverges from survey research, which finds concrete barriers more commonly reported than stigma (respondents' reports of embarrassment, pride, or discomfort). How can these seemingly contradictory findings be reconciled? We contend that the two types of barriers coexist simultaneously and that fully understanding reasons for non-use requires examining how symbolic understandings and concrete barriers reinforce one another. Stigma is not only an additional "cost" to be considered separately alongside others, such as learning about the program, but interacts with these other costs and barriers to shape non-use.

Previous research suggests that aspects of nonprofit service provision often considered concrete barriers are evaluated subjectively by potential users in ways that shape decisions about service use. Exploring the cultural construction of a specific concrete barrier, Kissane (2010) shows how a nonprofit's location is not solely an objective obstacle for potential users, reflecting physical distance or ability to travel to the organization. Rather, potential users interpret the barrier of location through judgments about neighborhood safety and the people who live there, uncovering the subjective understandings underlying respondents' conceptions of place. Our study applies this approach to other supposedly concrete barriers in the context of local food pantries, in order to better understand how cultural constructions shape these barriers.

Other research shows how potential users understand their own need relative to those they feel are needier, and, in doing so, assert their identity as self-sufficient, moral individuals (Kissane, 2012). Specifically relating to food pantries, SNAP recipients interviewed said they avoided food pantries because others needed the food more (Edin et al., 2013). Similarly, in interviews with 371 household heads in Toronto, 12% of food pantry non-users distanced themselves from food pantry users, seeing food pantries as intended for other groups, such as homeless and unemployed individuals; of those who said they did not need the food, some described their level of need as not severe enough to warrant food pantry use (Loopstra & Tarasuk, 2012). This research points to the role of potential users' perceptions of food pantry users in decision-making around accessing assistance.

We build on this work to focus in depth on the relationship between concrete barriers and cultural understandings across several concrete barriers to food pantry use identified by non-users, utilizing in-depth interviews focused specifically on food pantry non-use. Examining how these barriers relate to one another reconciles findings from survey and qualitative research regarding the role of cultural factors in decision-making about accepting assistance. Moreover, it provides insight into how seemingly concrete barriers are culturally constructed, as well as how feelings of stigma may be shaped by specific features of the nonprofit service experience.

Data and Methods

We interviewed 53 low-income individuals in San Francisco, California. Because we wanted to understand non-use for those with direct access to a pantry operating within their community, as well as non-use more generally, we recruited from three different target populations: low-income, primarily unemployed individuals from across the city; residents of a public housing project; and parents of children at an elementary school where nearly 90 percent of children qualify for free or reduced lunch. We selected the housing project and school purposively based on the San Francisco Food Bank's (SFFB's) perception of low utilization rates of pantries in those communities relative to the "objective" need in the population. We recruited individuals from across the city through a brief survey posted on a classified ads website frequently used by unemployed and underemployed individuals in San Francisco. We recruited respondents from the housing project in person at a community event and through door-to-door outreach. At the elementary school, we recruited respondents at a community event, through a flyer sent home to parents with children at the school, and through an outreach coordinator at a local health clinic.

We wanted to understand non-use among low-income individuals experiencing financial difficulty that might lead to food insecurity. Food pantries generally do not have eligibility requirements for people utilizing services except, in some cases, proof of address in the area where services are provided.

SFFB uses income below 185% of the federal poverty level as a basic guideline indicating need, though pantries do not check income or screen people based on this criterion. Our sample includes 53 respondents (18 recruited from the online survey, 17 recruited from the housing project, and 18 recruited from the school). All reported an income below 185% of the federal poverty level for households of their size, and all reported experiencing recent financial hardships but did not avail themselves of food pantry assistance. One-third (18 respondents) had recently skipped a meal or eaten less for financial reasons, and two-thirds (35 respondents) had experienced financial troubles in the past six months such that they had been unable to make ends meet.

Thus, food pantries could provide a substantial benefit for these respondents. SFFB, drawing on an Independent Auditors' Report provided to Feeding America, estimated the value of food pantry benefits at approximately \$40 per week. This comes to over \$2,000 per year if a household used the food pantry weekly. For households under 185% of the federal poverty line, this is approximately equivalent to the median food spending for one household member (Coleman-Jensen et al., 2013), and approximately one-fifth of the median income of our sample of respondents.

Table 1 provides demographic information about all respondents. Although this sample is not necessarily generalizable to all low-income non-users experiencing financial difficulty or food insecurity, it represents a broad assortment of non-users who vary along a number of key characteristics, such as age and number of children.

Interviews were conducted between November 2011 and May 2012 and typically lasted about 45 minutes. We conducted most interviews in public locations, including cafes, libraries, fast food restaurants, and local organizations. We audio-recorded all but two interviews with the respondents' permission. In non-recorded cases, we took extensive notes during and immediately following the interviews.

In interviews, we asked respondents about their household's eating habits, as well as their general financial situation and what they did when they encountered financial difficulties. The latter part of the interview focused specifically on

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

	n=53	%
Annual household income		
Less than \$10,000	24	45
\$10,000 - \$20,000	16	30
\$20,000 - \$30,000	5	9
\$30,000 - \$40,000	1	2
\$40,000 - \$50,000	1	2
Missing	6	11
Female	39	74
Race or ethnicity		
White non-Hispanic	12	23
Black non-Hispanic	21	40
Hispanic	11	21
Asian	2	4
Other/Multiple races	4	8
Missing	3	6
Number of children in household		
0	20	38
1 or 2	19	36
3 or more	8	15
Missing	6	11
Age		
22-30	18	34
31-40	7	13
41-50	7	13
50-64	12	23
65 and over	3	6
Missing	6	11
Household benefits receipt in the previous six months		
SNAP	18	34
Women, Infants, and Children	11	21
Subsidized housing	27	51
Subsidized healthcare	29	55
Subsidized childcare	8	15
Unemployment benefits	11	21
Temporary Assistance to Needy Families or General Assistance	9	17
Supplemental Security Income	19	36

food pantries. We asked open-ended questions about respondents' thoughts about food pantries: what they knew about them, any experiences they had, their perceptions of

accessibility, and their perceptions of food pantry clientele. Qualitative interviews enabled us to probe how respondents constructed particular barriers.

After transcription, we read each interview multiple times and coded using Dedoose, a qualitative data analysis program, for both theorized themes, such as lack of knowledge, and emergent themes, such as the emotional toll of use. Through this analysis, we identified the most prevalent barriers to use. We then reread the transcripts to analyze which barriers were mentioned by which respondents and how they were described. By "concrete barriers," we mean barriers rooted in supposedly objective observations about one's relationship with the pantry, including lack of information, physical or health challenges, scheduling issues, long lines, and poor quality food. (As we discuss below, such observations are not purely objective, but interpreted subjectively.) "Cultural barriers," on the other hand, refer to barriers emerging from symbolic understandings and subjective meaning-making, including a sense that the pantry was intended for others; racial tensions; disorganization or drama; emotional toll; staff issues such as favoritism; and a sense that people take advantage of the service.

Results

Consistent with survey research, almost all respondents discussed concrete barriers that kept them from using food pantries. All but two respondents (96%) mentioned one of the following barriers: a lack of need (42%), a lack of information (47%), physical or health challenges (11%), timing issues (25%), long lines (40%), and poor quality food (32%). Most mentioned more than one of these barriers, and none stood out as a predominant reason for non-use. Despite the ubiquitous reporting of concrete barriers, an analysis that rests there is incomplete. In our interviews, concrete and cultural considerations together emerged as salient. We argue that as these concepts are connected, they should not be considered in isolation. In eight cases (15%), concrete barriers alone, such as schedule conflicts, directly impacted decision-making. For others, however, whether concrete barriers impeded

utilization was modified by cultural interpretations of the barriers.

We focus on three ways in which concrete barriers interacted with subjective beliefs. First, perceptions that food pantries were meant to serve those with greater need shaped how non-users thought about their own need and their inclinations to seek out information about the pantry. Second, concerns about long lines were about more than one's time or ability to stand in line, but about distaste for certain racial groups, behavior, and values associated with those in line. Finally, for some respondents, negative comments about the food at the pantry indicated not only distaste for the food, but also a threat to their sense of self-respect. Taken together, respondents' articulation of concrete barriers formed part of a larger project of distancing themselves from perceived pantry clients and maintaining self-respect.

Relative Need and Conditional Information-Seeking

Non-users frequently said they did not need the food and/or did not know about the pantry. However, no respondent assessed her "need" for food pantry services according to objective markers, such as income, the gap between food expenses and available resources, or food insecurity standards. Underscoring the subjectivity and ambiguity in assessing need for food assistance services (Lipsky & Smith, 1989; Pimpare, 2009), this complicates the concept of "need" as something individuals construct relative to their perceptions and definitions of those for whom the food pantry is intended. Despite their own financial hardship and food insecurity, respondents felt the food pantry was intended for those even needier. Believing it would be inappropriate to utilize food pantry services given their resources, abilities, and personal situations, they felt a moral imperative to abstain. For some, this perception of need affected their inclination to seek information. Barriers often taken at face value—lack of need and lack of information—in fact signify subjective understandings of those for whom assistance is intended.

When discussing the intended clientele for food pantries, respondents invoked vulnerable populations seen as unable to take care of or help themselves, in situations different from

their own. Seven respondents talked about children and adults who had the responsibility of caring for many children. Other respondents distinguished themselves from those who were unable to work or could not find work. Sarah, a 29-year-old woman renting a room from another family, referred to another population in special need: "Many times I see the mentally ill that are homeless... They couldn't operate and function. The pantry is made for them." Sarah did not identify with those whom the pantry is "made for," saying, "I know that I've got people [who could help me], but I also know that there are some people out there that have nobody and have nothing. The pantry's made for them."

When respondents discussed need as a barrier to pantry use, they did not talk about food security, but instead emphasized their own lack of severe food insecurity compared with people they perceived as needing the food pantry. As Ned, a white man in his 50s, said:

My sister-in-law says, "Well, go down to the food bank." I'm thinking to myself, I don't really have to. There's a lot of people that are in worse strikes than I am... There are people out there much worse off than I am, than we are.

Ned had been unemployed for nearly a year and his wife was also unemployed and receiving disability benefits. He repeatedly used the interview to solicit employment prospects and was under considerable financial distress, yet he declined to consider food pantry assistance because others were "worse off."

Miriam, a 27-year-old white woman living with her parents and her two children, also attributed her non-use to lack of need, even though she frequently skipped meals to save money and ensure that her children were fed. Miriam said she would go to a food pantry "if I was in a place where I didn't have anything to feed my kids." Seeing the food pantry as intended for those with nothing, she did not identify with that dire level of need, even though she said she was "struggling." By setting such stark restrictions on the appropriate level of need for utilizing a food pantry, respondents closed off the possibility of self-identifying as potential food pantry users.

Understanding food pantries as intended for those needier than and/or different from themselves, some respondents did not conceive of the food pantry as a potential option. As mentioned above, lack of specific information about a local food pantry constituted a major barrier to pantry use in our sample, consistent with the literature. However, lack of such information was conditional. If low-income individuals do not see themselves as "pantry users," they may not think to seek out the information. As all respondents knew about the existence of food pantries in the abstract, the barrier of lack of knowledge—mentioned by almost half of respondents as a deterrent—was often rooted in the fact that respondents did not think such knowledge was relevant to them.

For example, Paula, a 33-year-old woman living with three roommates, said she was "really broke" two months prior to the interview and had trouble covering her expenses. Although she did not know where any food pantries were, she said she could search online. She had heard about food pantries, but did not have specific information because she did not perceive herself as a potential user: "There are some people that are like, you know, you can get free food over there. It doesn't always register. It's just like, oh, that's nice. I don't really think about it because I'm not that hungry." Paula's lack of information was shaped by perceptions about food pantry clientele as different from herself, experiencing a level of hardship beyond her own.

Similarly, June, a 31-year-old, unemployed white woman, attributed her lack of knowledge to her own resistance to identifying as a food pantry client. When asked if she knew of any food pantries nearby, she said:

No, and that's just my own [not searching]... I probably qualify for something like food stamps or food pantries for a couple years now, but I feel like, I don't know. So far it's like I've had the ability to go work, so it's like I don't feel like I'm in a position to take stuff for free.

Even though she is currently unemployed, she has the ability to work—a characteristic that she felt distinguished her from those "in a position" to use food pantry services.

Distinctions based on need not only led respondents not to identify with food pantry users, but also to abstain based on moral judgments, as in Kissane (2012). Because they felt the food was intended for those in greater need, it would be immoral for them to partake. June, in the excerpt above, linked her inclination to seek out information about food pantries to her sense that she ought to abstain. Despite material hardship and food insecurity, respondents did not identify as needy relative to others in the community. This led them to conclude that food pantries were not for people like them, and, often, to choose not to seek information or use a pantry. Thus, although lack of need and information may seem like objective barriers, subjective definitions of the needy figure prominently in decisions about non-use.

Behavioral and Racial Difference in Long Lines

Negative comments about the pantry's long lines—cited by two-fifths of respondents—and other perceptions of the food pantry experience often reflected judgments about pantry users' behavioral and racial differences. Respondents who drew on direct experiences observing food pantry lines often associated the racial "others" they saw in line with uncouth and immoral behavior that they contrasted to their own. Melvin, a 59-year-old black man living with his sister and his three grandchildren, described a recent experience:

It's about a month ago. I was gonna use [the pantry]—we needed some bread. We were low on funds. I thought about using one of the what they call food banks or one of the things like that, but when I approached the line, it was so many Asians out there that would outnumber us, no offense, I'm not prejudiced or nothing, I just couldn't do it ... It's just, God, the hours would have killed me to stand out there.

Alongside Melvin's perception of the long line as a concrete "cost" in terms of his time, Melvin's distaste also related to his observation of food pantry patrons as a group of "others." Although Asians were not the only people to use the pantry, many non-Asian respondents focused on this characteristic with which they did not identify.

Connected to but also beyond issues of race, respondents distanced themselves from the disorderly behavior they associated with food pantry users, referencing the pushing and rudeness they remembered from visits years ago. Janet, a single mother of three, said:

I got discouraged because it's like there'd just be so many people like—well the Asian people and they come, you know what I'm saying. They cut in line. They had a friend hold their spot. Then they bring five people in front of you. You know, it's just frustrating. Then you've got to wait three hours sometimes. It's like, I mean, it was so frustrating, I just said, I can't do it. I mean, even though it is free food, you know what I'm saying, vegetables and whatever and stuff but I was like my sanity. You know, I mean, they're just like, just cutting and they're pushing and they're coughing all over you, ooh, I'm like, don't get me wrong, I'm not prejudice in any kind of way, you know what I'm saying.

Janet's distaste for the line reflected frustrations with the rude behavior of those in the line. The economic cost of her time in line combined with signals of racial difference and undesirable behavior to deter food pantry use.

Behavioral and racial distinctions sometimes became moral distinctions. As discussed above, respondents saw the food pantry as intended for those in the greatest need. Thus, to use the pantry otherwise was an abuse of the system, which conflicted with respondents' senses of morality. Five respondents drew distinctions between the historically black community the pantry was intended to serve and the Asian users who frequented it. Arlene, a 60-year-old black woman living with her two nieces, attributed the long lines at the food pantry to people from outside the neighborhood and labeled such behavior "greedy and disrespectful":

The line is around four corners. No, and see I get an attitude. I start having panic attacks when I see them people, and I'm not racist, I'm not prejudice. It's just that's greediness... This is our community. This is our

neighborhood. This is where kids go to school, church, the whole nine yards. Why should we come after a person that don't live in our neighborhood?

In San Francisco, many local pantries are supposed to serve people who live within certain zip codes, so associating someone with a different community suggested they were cheating the system. Our data cannot confirm that individuals who were not residents of the community were accessing or monopolizing services. Nevertheless, when explaining why they did not use the pantry, some respondents linked long lines at the pantry to perceptions that those in line were taking advantage of the system.

Although Asians were the primary racial group mentioned by respondents, racial and behavioral distinctions were not limited to this group. Nan, an Asian mother living with her husband and two children in the housing project, said people at the food pantry lack "a good education," so she worried about arguments leading to violence. She commented that the people in her neighborhood who use the pantry are "really different," noting their "drug problem[s]" and illegal behavior. These behavioral differences she perceived deterred her from accessing the pantry.

Similarly, Bettina, a Hispanic mother of four, referred to the people in line as "crack heads," "dirty," and drug users. She also drew racial distinctions when discussing the lines: "To be honest, you know why I don't go? [Interviewer: Why?] Because first thing in the morning it's a crowd in there, okay? Because they're from here, they're black, it's like they barge in." For Bettina, the crowd reflected broader symbolic issues of racial and behavioral difference.

Terrence, a 24-year-old black man who had barely eaten the day of his interview because of lack of money, said he felt "overwhelmed" by the "huge crowds" of rude, disrespectful Asian patrons whom he all but accused of using the pantry in an immoral manner:

[I]t's bad enough you're standin' out there in the line and stuff like that because you need that support. The last thing you wanna have to deal with is the people in line that aren't as appreciative as you are about the

stuff and they're not there for the same reasons that you are there for the stuff. You're there to get the things so that you can cook 'em and that you can eat 'em and that you can, ya know, enjoy 'em and that they can help you survive and get by and make ends meet.

As these comments suggest, respondents' understandings of who is in the line, how they behave, and why they are there are central to their conception of the line as a barrier. Non-users perceived users as unruly and greedy, in contrast to their own identities as polite and restrained. Other studies may have attributed this kind of response to stigma or to concrete barriers like the inconvenience of long lines, but we show how the two are connected. Lines and crowds, often interpreted in the literature as a physical barrier or an economic cost, constituted a threat to personal identity that influenced the decision not to use the pantry.

Food Quality and Respect

For some respondents, concrete concerns about the food pantry indicated a sense of disrespect. Specifically, comments about poor food quality—mentioned by about one-third of respondents—often represented more than respondents' feelings about the food itself. For some respondents, this perceived poor quality contributed to the low sense of self-worth associated with going to the food pantry and indicated a lack of respect on the part of the food pantry. Drawing on what she had seen from friends who frequented the pantry, Mary, a 52-year-old white woman living by herself, contrasted "the same stupid government cheese and beans and potatoes" and food "from the bottom of the barrel" at her local food pantry with the "good" and "real" food at another food pantry that no longer operated. She saw the type and quality of food offered as second-class, which reinforced her sense that going to the food pantry was akin to receiving government handouts rather than shopping for "real" food.

Bettina found the food on offer dehumanizing. When she moved to the housing project nine years earlier, she went with a friend once: "[T]hey gave me some roast beef that was expired ... I mean how come you gonna give away to the community food that is expired?... I mean come on? Are these

community pet animal? Not even the animal should eat something bad." For Bettina, who said earlier in the interview that utilizing the food pantry would be "lowering" herself, accepting this poor quality food was to lose some basic human dignity. She also interpreted the food quality as indicative of the pantry's preferences and respect for her, commenting that food pantry volunteers give better food to "their own people ... the best for the blacks and less for Latinos."

Carol, a 58-year-old black woman, contrasted the food offered—"nothin' but some vegetables or some eggs"—with what the food pantry provided years ago, when she volunteered there:

When we did it—me and [another woman]—we made sure that the community had what they wanted... During those times we gave away water—you know the water filters—and bleach, soap powder, shampoo, conditioner ... pastrami, salami—we're talkin' about deli meat—all different types of canned goods, not like what they give away over here.

After noting that the food at the food pantry was not "quality" or "fresh," she said, "I'm sayin' serve the community a little bit better. If they wanna help 'em, help 'em a little bit better than that." Thus, the type and quality of food at the food pantry dissuaded respondents not only because of the food itself, but because of the statement such low-quality food made about their position in society and the respect they felt from service providers. Declining the food was part of an effort to maintain their sense of self-worth and self-respect.

Implications for Practice

Although some food pantries may be overwhelmed by demand for assistance, they are not reaching a population of eligible and food-insecure people, for reasons other than resource capacity. Our findings illustrate how understanding the perceptions of potential users could help providers improve service delivery to reach more individuals in need. Although the implications we describe below may be specific to the local context we studied, they highlight broader issues for food

pantries to consider, related to outreach, delivery method, and benefits offered. Moreover, our results emphasize the need for all service providers to consider their policies and practices from the perspective of potential users, in addition to donors, volunteers, staff members, and current users.

First, we found that many people who could have benefited from pantry services thought they were for people even needier. This perception may come from pantry marketing, which is consumed by both potential donors and potential users. These messages can have unintended consequences for potential users, deterring them by communicating a dire need for donations to support the most destitute in the community. Respondents were under the impression pantries did not have enough resources, perhaps due to news stories about increased demand for food pantries and marketing campaigns emphasizing hungry citizens, especially children, in need of assistance. This perception may have shaped beliefs that the resource should be reserved for more needy people. However, in the Great Recession, donations to food banks in America's largest cities have almost universally increased, in some cases quite dramatically (Reich, Wimer, Mohamed, & Jambulapati, 2011), generating the potential to reach more people. In 2013, two-thirds of food banks surveyed by Feeding America reported having enough or more than enough food to meet clients' needs (Weinfeld et al., 2014).

Although many food pantries do struggle with limited resources, reaching as many people as possible may require a shift in messaging. Service providers might also emphasize the diversity of service users in outreach materials, to change the perception that the food pantry is only for those with children or with disabilities. Highly publicized campaigns geared toward donors and funders that characterize service users as needy or as victims may drive away potential users if those in need do not identify this way. Outreach efforts could also highlight the way in which accessing food pantry food represents resourcefulness rather than dependence or receiving a "handout."

Second, long lines or large crowds were often the most noticeable feature of the pantry, making a strong impression on passers-by who drew behavioral, racial, and moral distinctions. Providers should strive to reduce the disorderly crowds

that dissuaded potential users from accessing the pantry. Operating a farmer's market or supermarket style pantry open for longer periods of time might reduce lines and chaos, as well as the opportunity for people to draw conclusions about the types of people who use pantries. Pantries should consistently enforce eligibility rules, such as residence in the neighborhood, to reduce perceptions of fraud.

Finally, when the food is not of the type or quality desired, users or potential users interpret this as a sign of disrespect from the provider. Many food pantries distribute surplus food from local producers and retail providers, which decreases food waste and enables pantries to provide more food given resource constraints. Although this may reduce the pantry's costs, it increases the costs to potential users' senses of self-worth. In addition to ensuring that users do not receive expired or rotten food, pantries might seek input from potential users regarding the types of food they want. This would better inform potential food donors, as well as reduce food waste by providing individuals with food they want and will eat.

Implementing each of these shifts in practice necessitates increased support for public and private food assistance. High levels of unmet need (U.S. Conference of Mayors, 2012) mean that food pantries are more than occupied meeting current demand. Although focusing on outreach, increasing hours, consistently enforcing rules, and improving the food offered will require additional resources, these efforts may be critical to increase food pantry utilization and ultimately reduce food insecurity. Service providers need to consider not only the experience of those who utilize their services, but also of those in need and eligible who do not. Taking this broader view, non-users become clients whose needs must also be met.

Conclusion

Our study shows how the concrete barriers to service use emphasized by survey research are constructed subjectively, providing insight into how cultural ideals of self-sufficiency, morality, and respect crystallize to influence service non-use. Respondents' perceptions that the pantry was intended for those needier than themselves shaped their identification as potential users and their inclination to seek out information.

Observations of long lines and poor food quality at the pantry were connected with distaste for the food pantry environment and a threat to their sense of self-respect. We argue that taking these cultural understandings into account is necessary to understand how concrete barriers matter for non-users.

Although we conducted informal observations of three food pantries to provide context for our analysis, we do not attempt to compare respondents' perceptions of the food pantry experience or food pantry users with any "objective" reality, as we focus on respondents' interpretations of the food pantry. Additionally, we cannot compare our respondents' perceptions with those of food pantry users to establish whether the barriers mentioned by our sample were present for them. For example, food pantry users may also perceive the pantry as a site of racial and behavioral difference from which they wanted to distance themselves, but may use the food pantry nonetheless due to a higher level of food insecurity.

Future research should investigate the racial and group dynamics of social service use. Since we did not anticipate that race would be an important factor, due to its absence in the literature on service use, we did not design our study to explore this systematically. We recommend that future research on service participation take ethno-racial differences and perceptions as a central area of study.

Concrete logistical barriers, from inconvenient times to long lines, do keep many low-income Americans from patronizing food pantries. However, as social service providers such as food pantries seek to reach those in need, they should consider how these concrete barriers may be manifestations of cultural perceptions. In our study, respondents' discussion of concrete barriers related to their failure to identify with food pantry users, desires to distance themselves from these users, and feelings of disrespect from service providers. Although cultural perceptions may not change overnight, neither are they fixed. Because concrete and cultural considerations are tightly intertwined, making concrete changes may, over time, shift cultural perceptions. If changes in policy and practice are to make a difference in service use, they will do so not only by removing concrete impediments, but also by transforming cultural understandings.

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