



Everyone Welcome?

Examining race and food co-ops

BY JADE BARKER AND PATRICIA CUMBIE

“The questions which one asks oneself begin, at least, to illuminate the world, and become one’s key to the experience of others.”—James A. Baldwin

Part of our professional work is to support people acting together for a common purpose. We do this by working with co-ops to improve their relationships with all their stakeholders—owners, staff, board, managers, communities—to better govern, educate, and promote cooperation. Most of these people are committed to creating a better world.

Why so white?

Cooperatives are an international movement, yet as we looked around the U.S. food co-op sector, most of the people we saw were white. We asked ourselves a simple and powerful question: Why?

We decided that this was something we wanted to investigate. Why are food co-ops—which are guided by cooperative values such as equity and equality—so white? It’s a question that has been a long time coming. Many of our new wave food cooperatives have reached 40-year anniversaries. In business for more than a generation, why don’t these co-ops reflect greater diversity on their boards or within their membership?

We wondered: Is it because some of them are in racially segregated population areas? Is it because food co-ops aren’t valued by certain groups of people? Is it because of the products sold? Or is it because there is something preventing the participation of everyone who might benefit from food co-ops?

As a writing team of women, white and black, who are deeply influenced by both history and contemporary storytelling, we believed the answers to our questions could come from people who had experienced food co-ops at different points in time. We wanted to inquire of our elders and contemporaries, people of different racial backgrounds, who have made contributions to our movement.

Together with a team of our colleagues, we created a project titled, “Everyone Welcome?” to help us answer our questions. Both of us have interviewed notable cooperators to help us think about the racial makeup of food co-ops today. We believe that sharing their experiences and their ideas for the future could help us change the present. We are crafting these interviews into personal narratives and will be sharing them with the co-op

sector. They will be published in the CDS Consulting Co-op library this fall of 2017, thanks to financial support from National Co+op Grocers, Cooperative Development Foundation, CDS Consulting Co-op, and 20 food co-ops.

Race and food co-ops

While immersed in this project, we’ve been introduced to a variety of people and discovered many excellent resources. Our conclusion to “Everyone Welcome?” will have a synthesis and individual narratives along with a resource section.

In most food co-ops across the country, nearly everyone involved, from board members, staff, management, and the customer base, is white—and represents a subset of Americans supported in their attainment of high-quality natural foods by higher education and professional occupations. According to our interviews, many of our participants of color have long felt excluded or ignored by the white food co-op movement, despite its professed values of equity and cooperation.

Most progressive people agree that racism is a societal problem. Yet it is a challenge to recognize how long-held beliefs and biases, unconscious and not, could be informing our individual and organizational behaviors. Is it possible that the opinions, needs and demands of people of color have been ignored, not just in our society, but also within the food co-op sector?

We selected participants for our project from across the food co-op sector. Some have extensive multi-decade experience with food co-ops; for some, food co-ops were a brief but memorable episode in a varied career path. We wanted to include a variety of perspectives and ended up with about a dozen narratives, about half from people who identify as white and half as people of color. With our participant selection, we knew we wouldn’t be able fully represent the spectrum of racial experiences in food co-ops, or even fully represent even one person’s story, but felt that we needed to start somewhere.

We are personally moved and grateful for the thoughts and opinions shared by the participants in our narrative project. What follows are some of the things we learned.

“People like us”

One of the first things we noticed in our interviews is that people’s life experiences strongly shape their opinions and perspectives. Somewhat like the story of the blind people and the elephant, in which each individual has a different understanding of the elephant depending on which part they are touching, our participants’ race, upbringing, economic class, and role in co-ops influenced their outlook.

Our participants, regardless of race, agreed that, by and large, food co-ops have paid little attention to addressing racial inequality. And, while many participants would likely agree that racism has played a role in the racial makeup of today’s food co-ops, racism wasn’t often mentioned (perhaps because of the vagueness of the term). More commonly, a lack of interest, awareness, or knowledge of how people of color experience the food co-op world was mentioned as a reason for the current, almost ubiquitous, whiteness of food co-ops.

Some participants commented that people are generally more comfortable with people they perceive as being like themselves, and that this comfort has contributed to food co-op’s inaction when it comes to dealing with race. Some participants also believe that this comfort with “people

like us,” has affected co-op hiring practices; people are hired because they already fit into the co-op’s culture. Additionally, that many current food co-ops grew out of hippie culture, a culture often viewed by people of color as elitist and accessible only to the white middle class, was also seen as a barrier to racial diversity.

There was also a perception among many we interviewed that food co-ops are rigid and judgmental in their approach to food, and that attitudes about food “purity” and what one participant called “food rules” can be off-putting to people who have not adopted this approach.

The type of food sold by co-ops was also perceived as a barrier: some participants felt that so-called natural food is in itself elitist and a luxury item available to only a select few. Yet others complained that white cooperators assume that people of color are not interested in healthy food, a claim that many refuted as untrue. Some observed that co-ops have adopted “a food-first, co-op-second approach that has put natural food above cooperation as the organizational focus.” They believe that food co-op’s focus on natural foods has excluded people who choose not to eat that way.

Our participants mentioned many factors contributing to food co-ops’ lack of racial diversity; a summary would likely say, “It’s complicated.”

Some personal lessons

If we are to make any progress toward reconciling our racial history and being truly inclusive within our food co-ops, we need to be clear about how this injustice to all of us is perpetrated, both systemically and individually. This will require honest reflection. Steps toward changing any institution or business have to go hand-in-hand with individual personal change. We’ve both been changed in a positive way by the work we’ve done so far, and we hope that this project’s completion will offer those who read it something of value in their own journey of transformation.

Patricia’s perspective:

At the beginning of the project, I was concerned that people of color would be afraid to share their real experiences with me, and I was honored that they trusted me with their stories. I worried these interviews would be emotionally difficult for the participants, yet it turned out people were also eager to speak about their experiences and finally be heard. It taught me how important it is to engage in deep listening when people are sharing stories of race.

Talking with white people presented me with a different set of challenges. White people have to overcome barriers to talk frankly about race and may be uncomfortable or cautious with the topic and often feel stymied about how to proceed. Admitting to painful truths about ways they or their food co-ops

have not always been welcoming or culturally competent required high levels of courage and trust from the white participants, too. Their willingness to offer their accounts demonstrated to me how essential that is to honest assessment.

This project has been a personal and professional breakthrough for critically examining the co-op story, changing my assumptions, and applying them to my current work. Ultimately, I hope people reading the forthcoming narratives will have similar opportunities for contemplation, conversation, and transformation.

Jade’s perspective:

I started this project feeling frustrated and distressed by the seeming lack of interest by many of my fellow co-operators in the challenges I was facing around race in our co-ops. They seemed to feel either that my experiences were “no big deal” or that they were not relevant to the work we were doing together. It felt deeply disempowering to be told, or more usually demonstrated by disinterest, that my issues weren’t important. Being challenged to “prove” that I was being impacted by issues related to race was an impossible task when speaking to people who had already made up their minds that no problem exists, or if it does, it has nothing to do with them.

The interviews turned out to be different than I had imagined. Not every person of color had an interest in supporting white people in their racial healing; some felt that they had already given enough and wanted to focus their efforts on supporting people of color. Others didn’t see achieving racial diversity in food co-ops as a solution to either personal or structural racism, though they were still open to sharing their thoughts and ideas. While I had expected that people of color wouldn’t have a universal perspective on issues of race, I was surprised at the range of differences—although each had been affected by racism in their lives, some quite profoundly.

When talking to whites, I was frequently surprised by the depth of their thoughtfulness and their willingness to share and examine their racial experiences. I also learned that racial segregation, and a general unwillingness to talk about the role race plays in our co-ops, is a complex problem that has impacts on multiple levels—including personal, cultural, economic, and psychological.

I’ve come to believe that mistrust, misconceptions, and misunderstandings are ubiquitous in our cross-racial relationships, and that achieving racial equity in our food co-ops will only be achieved through honest and trusting conversations across race. Each of us has something to offer, and also something to learn.

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on the racial issues that plague our co-ops today.
Our project is a contribution toward
sparking crucial conversations.*

How can food co-ops increase their racial diversity?

Our project participants were generous with their ideas for how food co-ops might strive not just towards achieving racial diversity but also towards being fully inclusive of other races. Here are ten of their ideas:

- Hire from the community. If your co-op is located in a multi-racial community, make sure your staff reflects that community's makeup, in both line staff and leadership.
- Collaborate with communities of color, especially organizations that share values with the co-op.
- Address the concerns of people of color already in your organization.
- Learn about and equally value the histories of people who aren't white.
- Learn about the effects of racism, and continue honest conversations about race.
- Develop strong conflict-resolution systems to address disagreements when they arise.
- Develop outreach materials that speak to the experiences of people of color.

- Emphasize the co-op's core values.
- Create more affordable food options for people in our communities who have limited resources, many of whom are people of color.
- Be committed to positive change.

Conclusion

We realized, partway into our project, that we were asking people to reveal a lot in these narratives. Talking about race is a difficult topic in America, and often fraught with strong emotions. For many of us, our lives have been deeply segregated from our earliest memories, causing deep and often unconscious divisions and distrust, cultivating a cyclical multi-generational racial crisis.

What we have learned from both people of color and white participants in our project is that there is unacknowledged racism in food co-ops. Through our work on this project we came to believe that there is no one right perspective on the racial issues that plague our co-ops today. Our project is a contribution toward improving this dynamic and sparking crucial conversations. □

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