



GUEST EDITORIAL

ARDYTH HARRIS GILLESPIE

Balancing multiple perspectives for collaborative food decision-making

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Recently a co-worker asked me what I thought about Mayor Bloomberg’s initiative to limit the size of soft drinks sold in New York City, a topic I had neither followed closely nor analyzed. Although I hadn’t formulated an opinion on public policies on drink size, it struck me that this issue presented interesting and fundamental questions about community decisions that potentially affect us all. This particular soft drink policy is an example of how large issues of community concern seem to end up as conflict over single aspects. To me the big question is when differences in views and different interests are involved, how do we honor multiple perspectives in collaborative decision-making? Can we find ways to blend and balance diverse perspectives as we strive to create a world we desire? I think that we must think about what are the *right questions*; that is in this particular case, *what are the most central or transformative questions of our day regarding food systems for health and well-being?*

One way of approaching the central questions is through forming collaborative engaged research (CER) leadership teams that include academics, practitioners, and food systems stakeholders (Gillespie & Gillespie, 2006). The Food CER leadership teams in which I am involved have several characteristics. We seek to pursue shared and complementary goals for improving the sustainability of community food

Ardyth Marie Harris Gillespie is associate professor in the Division of Nutritional Sciences at Cornell University and a co-leader of the Family and Community Food Decision-making Project (www.Familyfood.Human.Cornell.edu), a faculty fellow with the David R. Atkinson Center for a Sustainable Future, and a Collaborator faculty member, Food Science and Human Nutrition, Iowa State University. She is the co-author with Guan-Jen Sung of the forthcoming “Enhancing interdisciplinary communication: Collaborative engaged research on food systems for health and well-being” in *Enhancing Communication & Collaboration in Interdisciplinary Research*, edited by M. O’Rourke, S. Crowley, S. D. Eigenbrode, and J. D. Wulfhorst, to be published by SAGE in 2013.

She is the co-chair of the *Journal of Agriculture, Food Systems, and Community Development* leadership team. She can be contacted at ahg2@cornell.edu.


systems so that we will be able to nourish *and* nurture children, youth, and their families across generations. We reject stereotypes about low-income families, families of color, and gendered food decision-making roles and seek to understand what our families think and do. We avoid privileging “scientific” knowledge over the “experiential” knowledge of family and community food decision-makers, embracing thoughtfully the wisdom generated by combining multiple ways of knowing. We strive to integrate principles and practices from appreciative inquiry (Watkins, Mohr, & Kelly, 2011) and open space technology (Owen, 1997) in creating contexts for transparent communication and transformative learning (Taylor, 2000) as we engage diverse stakeholders in collaborative decision-making. A CER process creates contexts conducive to focusing on opportunities through collaboration and for innovation on the “verge,” that is, on the fringe of a particular discipline or perspective. Futurist Joel Barker describes the “verge” as a place “where something and something else meet” (Barker, 2008, p. 155). This notion provides both an opportunity and a dilemma for academics, practitioners, and food systems stakeholders moving out from the center of a discipline; inventing new practices and making opportunities for new subcultural norms to emerge.

While CER approaches may offer great potential for engaging people in efforts that will help them achieve their goals, CER practitioners, especially those in research university settings, face some risks. This approach is at variance with dominant approaches to research, so those who do such work may find themselves isolated, marginalized or excluded from influence on institutional decision-making — with adverse consequences relating to job security, tenure, promotion, and other rewards of conformity. Many years ago, an experienced and wise community collaborator sent me the following quote from Machiavelli’s *The Prince*:

There is no more delicate matter to take in hand, or more dangerous to conduct, but to be a leader in the introduction of changes. For he [or she] who innovates will have for enemies all those who are well-off under the old order of things, and only lukewarm supporters in those who might be better off under the new. (Chapter VI)

Returning to the transformative questions I alluded to in the first paragraph, I think experimentation with thinking on the “verge” from multiple perspectives in CER has led to new perspectives and more relevant questions. These questions are useful for moving beyond the central traditions and constraints of educational and food systems: *What is already going on? Who’s involved? Who should be involved? What more might we do through collaboration?* (Gillespie, Gantner, Craig, Dischner, & Lansing, 2003). As illustrated by the core questions for considering opportunities, CER practitioners prioritize assets, strengths, and opportunities over identifying problems and solutions. They embrace multiple perspectives and roles when building and maintaining CER leadership teams. In addition to identifying opportunities and leadership team members, a CER process includes organizing learning teams, creating communicative exchange strategies, emphasizing inquiring and analyzing, and promoting reflecting and innovating. All these elements of the process are cyclic and bidirectional. Additionally a CER process with participant learners continues to evolve, leading to new initiatives and reflection on respective learning experiences. In the spirit of innovation, equity, and justice, we pause at the “verge” to expand our mindsets and ways of thinking — and create a better world beyond our present individual and collective images.

Thinking again about the issue of regulating the size of soft drinks in New York City, a CER approach could help bring together stakeholders with seemingly conflicting goals and perspectives to consider their common and/or complementary goals — such as the health and well-being of children (Gillespie et al.,

2003) — without sacrificing the integrity of each participating organization. Might bringing the right groups together and working to figure out the right questions and how to address them be a better use of resources for enhancing health and well-being than the too common practice of squabbling about the faults of others, and the minutia of how much is too much, or relying on hard-won policies to fix our problems? 

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