

Bursting the “Magic Bubble”: Perceptions of Identity at the Farmers Market

Researcher: Isabel Staton, Mentor: Hilary King, PhD
Department of Anthropology, College of Arts and Sciences
Emory University, Atlanta, GA 30322



Introduction

Farmers' markets are unique spaces with the potential to build intentional communities that address issues that typical market systems cannot (Myers, 2015). In the past few decades, there have been discussions about the ability of local food systems to address racial inequity, particularly at farmers' markets. Many scholars and food system actors are skeptical of the current effectiveness of food justice work taking place at these markets.

We found that nationwide conversations about race are reflected at farmers' markets in the forms of colorblindness and anti-racism. This project asked:

- What policies do farmers' market organizations have related to DEI among their vendors?
- How do farmer vendors and market managers discuss the role that identity plays in shaping market dynamics?

Methods and Objectives

Through 83 semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and content analysis of market documents at 15 farmers' markets across four states in the Southeast (Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia), this project:

- Synthesized important literature that advises market organizations on addressing diversity.
- Documented policies related to diversity, equity, and inclusion at the markets included in the project.
- Explored participants' perspectives on the relationship between identity, economic success, and quality of life at farmers' markets.

Seeing farmers markets as a “Magic Bubble” demonstrates a degree of colorblindness

Some markets see themselves as a "magic bubble" in which some organizers and some vendors assume that the farmers market is a space of universal acceptance and openness of racial diversity. As a result, these farmers' markets choose not to engage in racial equity work because it was perceived as unnecessary. We see this as an example of colorblindness in two ways:

Racial issues seen as elsewhere

“We're in a magical bubble. Other markets have issues with that, especially out in the rural areas.”

“I don't know if it's because we're so far out, but it seems everyone talks to one another, we don't really have any issues with that (racism).”

Within the "magic bubble" narrative, people often did not deny that racism was a problem; instead, they claimed it did not affect their market.

Confusion: “Why aren't people coming?”

Sometimes people wanted the market to be more racially diverse, but there was an expectation for BIPOC communities to join the market even with limited outreach.

“I don't know that we've ever had any complaints that we're not being inclusive. We try to bring in as much as possible. I would love to have more diverse vendors, but at the same time, we just don't have them applying.”

Some markets are implementing proactive antiracist policies

The other trend we observed was the implementation of antiracist proactive policies. In some cases, these DEI policies that lacked transparency, leading to distrust between the farmers and the managers. In another, a market that attempted to implement proactive DEI policies found those policies were met with backlash.

Opaque systems sow rumors

“I heard that farmers of color didn't have to pay market fees. I don't know if that's actually true. I know that I pay market fee and it's a high one.”

One market waived vendor fees for BIPOC farmers. However, this policy was not communicated openly, and other farmers learned of it through rumors. The lack of transparency led to distrust and concerns about how the policy was funded.

Open policies can spur backlash

“Now they want to include everyone, but you can't include everyone while you exclude the actual farmers creating your farmers' market.”

Some managers who were transparent about implementing DEI policies received backlash. Some people opposed the efforts to address race at the market.

Discussion

Across the study, we observed the emergence of a "magic bubble" narrative at several markets. This narrative suggests that racial equity is conceived of as not requiring active effort, implying that it can be achieved simply through interaction or the good intentions of a community. However, we found that this did not always result in racial equity, as several markets that discussed the "magic bubble" also reported a lack of diversity and vendors reported sometimes feeling excluded.

In markets where DEI policies were implemented, there was often backlash. The one market in our study that had clear and transparent DEI policies faced significant push back from some vendors, suggesting divisions in ideas about how racial equity should be promoted at farmers' markets.

Conclusion

We observed several trends that make racial equity work difficult at farmers markets. One of these trends was the "magic bubble" narrative, which made it seem as though racial equity was not an issue. Additionally, at markets that did implement DEI policies, backlash from some vendors challenged policies.

Despite the prominence of the "magic bubble" and the backlash against DEI policies, vendor experiences suggest that addressing racial equity is important for farmers markets. Future research can help determine the most effective ways to implement antiracist policies at farmers markets.

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