Low-income Aboriginal women’s foodscapes: Moving towards geography of food dignity

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Aboriginal women in low-income Winnipeg neighbourhoods face combined challenges of ethno-racial and socioeconomic deprivation that contribute to food insecurity. Yet there is a lack of research that has investigated the totality of their food insecurity including the social and physical geographic effects as they relate to negative health outcomes as experienced by young Aboriginal mothers. This research study uses the concept of ‘foodscapes’ – that is, the total geography associated with the acquisition and consumption of food – to determine its utility in characterizing everyday neighbourhood settings of food insecure women in Winnipeg. A mixed methods approach was used to investigate foodscapes of students at Ka Ni Kanichihk (n=7) who self-identified as Aboriginal women, were under the age of 30, had one or more children, and were recipients of social assistance. Using a combination of two semi-structured focus group interview sessions, accompanied by observations of food providers in Winnipeg (n=9), the findings revealed multiple barriers related to accessibility, transportation, discriminatory food environments, poor food quality, and lack of affordable food, that women encountered during their food journeys. Underlying the discriminatory foodscapes of Aboriginal women in Winnipeg is the reoccurring theme that women’s dignity is adversely affected in multiple ways during their food journeys.

Keywords: Aboriginal women, geography, foodscapes, food dignity, food insecurity, feminist research

Introduction

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Introduction

Food insecurity, defined as the inability to properly access a diet of adequate nutritional quality and quantity in a socially acceptable and dignified manner (Dietetics of Canada, 1993; Davis & Tarasuk, 1994), has been shown to contribute to chronic health problems such as obesity and depression in Aboriginal communities (Reading & Wien, 2009). In scrutinizing the prevalence of food insecurity among Aboriginal households in Canada, Willows et al. (2009) found that at least 33% of Aboriginal people living off reserve in Canada experience moderate to severe food insecurity compared to 9% of non-Aboriginal people. According to the 2004 Canadian Community Health Survey Cycle 2.2, Aboriginal women single parented households (living off reserve) were 53.1% more likely to suffer from food insecurity as compared to 27.5% of Aboriginal dual parent households (Health Canada, 2006).

Food insecurity as experienced by Aboriginal women is an inherently complex phenomenon involving both historical and geographic processes associated with the present-day effects of colonialism, patriarchy, and socioeconomic exclusion. The resulting socioeconomic inequities Aboriginal women experience as compared to non-Aboriginal women in Canada includes: higher rates of lone parenthood, higher poverty rates, and a lower likelihood of graduation with a post-secondary degree (Statistics Canada, 2011). A 2009 study of food insecure young urban Aboriginal mothers in Saskatchewan, reported that the combination of lone parenthood, insecure housing and lack of social
support, has left many Aboriginal women in Canada struggling financially to make ends meet, particularly when it comes to food security (Baskin et al., 2009). Lack of necessary income, in combination with inadequate neighbourhood infrastructure and social supports, has left many Aboriginal women in Winnipeg facing a daily struggle to purchase the necessary quantities of healthy food for their families.

Food security is a key social determinant of health (Mikkonen & Raphael, 2010). Yet to date, there has not been a robust geographic analysis of the inequitable physical and social causes and effects of food insecurity from the perspective of urban Aboriginal women, particularly in relation to potentially discriminatory environments and undignified experiences that women may encounter in attempting to access food for their families. This paper aims to address this gap by reporting on a study that investigated neighbourhood level geographic foodscapes of Aboriginal low-income single mothers in Winnipeg, Canada in order to promote a better understanding of the determinants of food insecurity in the city.

Background

Poverty, food insecurity, and mental health
According to the report, Women’s Poverty and the Recession (2009), people living in racialized communities in Canada, particularly women, children, or Aboriginal peoples experience higher than average rates of poverty (CCPA, 2009). People who are vulnerable to poverty are often the most vulnerable to food insecurity (Travers, 1996). Peake and Kobayshi (2002) discuss the spatial effects of racism as it relates to poverty and how this can lead to the prevention of access to necessary social goods and services such as food.

The immediate response to food insecurity among vulnerable communities remains charitable donations (i.e. food banks, soup kitchens). However, the recent emergence of community food security initiatives such as community kitchens has attempted to reduce reliance on food charitable measures (Hamelin et al., 2008). Although these responses have arisen in part due to the ineffectiveness of current social assistance levels required to meet people’s basic needs, (Tarasuk, 2001; Travers, 1996) there is a need to further explore the underlying factors such as lack of response to reducing poverty, which allows income inequalities and thus food insecurity to be perpetuated (Travers, 1996).

Determinants of food insecurity in Canada have been conventionally characterized in relation to inadequate consumption of healthy foods such as fruits and vegetables (Riccuto & Tarasuk, 2010), reduced social assistance levels (Gurstein & Vilches, 2017) and lack of income to pay for food (Tarasuk & Reynolds, 1999; Travers, 1996). However, such characterization has had an individualizing effect (Travers, 1996), even when taking into account contextual parameters such as geographic access to food vendors and availability of healthy food choices.

An emerging body of literature is beginning to examine the mental health effects of food insecurity (see Jacobson et al. 2009; Heflin et al., 2001). This work increasingly identifies mental health implications of food insecurity as fundamentally connected to the social and physical geographic contexts of women’s lives. For example, Jacobson et al. (2009), found that people in Toronto struggling to obtain resources, including food, felt their dignity was violated, thus leading to feelings of shame, identity damage and loss, apathy, and depression. Similarly, a Toronto study of food bank use among women and their families, found that the vast majority of participants felt shame, embarrassment, degradation and humiliation in association with food bank visits, particularly when it came to informing their children about their dependency on charity (Tarasuk & Beaton, 1999). Such studies point to inherent discriminatory geographies that are implicated in food insecurity, both in terms of concrete physical geographies of distance and time, as well as socio-spatial processes and relations involved in food journeys. Furthermore, food insecurity has implications for women’s mental health, as they are obliged to confront humiliating and undignified encounters when providing food for their families.

Foodscapes
Recently, geographers have identified the foodscape concept as a useful approach to analyze the spatial relations between the human-food interface, particularly as it affects health and social well-being (Panelli & Tipa, 2005). For the purposes of this paper we define foodscapes as, “the total social and physical geographic context involved in the acquisition and consumption of food.”

Physical geographical parameters include points of contact where food is grown, purchased and consumed, including grocers, convenience stores, restaurants, farmers markets, food banks, drop-in centres, and shelters (Winson, 2004). Social geographic parameters include the encounters, experiences, and observations of individuals as they interact with people and places during their food journeys (Panelli & Tipa, 2005).

In moving beyond typical instrumental problems of inequitable food access and distribution, Panelli and Tipa (2005) argue that foodscapes can expose the politics of food acquisition, including the structural inequities, discriminatory practices, and resulting inadequate nutritional and mental health effects on food insecure groups. For example, the decision regarding which vendors’ women choose to purchase food at is not only a function of distance, but may also be influenced by factors such as the price, variety, and availability of desired food items at particular vendors (Ball et al., 2008). Thus, the foodscape concept can be a useful lens for the purpose of investigating the unique experiences of food insecure Aboriginal women who live in socioeconomically deprived neighbourhoods, as it provides a means to contextualize the discriminatory geographies of: food vendor distribution, food journeys, individual experiences within particular food settings, and food consumption.

Research Setting
This research was conducted in Winnipeg (pop. 778, 400), Canada’s seventh largest city and capital of the Province of Manitoba (Statistics Canada, 2013). Winnipeg is made up of 236 diverse neighbourhoods (City of Winnipeg, 2010). Several low-income
neighbourhoods in the core area are characterized by varying depths of high levels of poverty, crime, and racialization. In recent decades, Aboriginal people have migrated en masse into Winnipeg as conditions on reserves and other rural and remote locations continue to worsen amidst continuing governmental neglect (Peters, 1998; Wilson & Peters, 2005; Silver, 2006). The migration of Aboriginal peoples into cities has contributed to a heightened level of race-based anxiety among the population, which has in turn contributed to the ongoing racial segregation of the core area from the rest of the city (Silver, 2006). Current statistics report that within Canada the largest number of urban Aboriginal peoples reside in Winnipeg, which also includes the highest proportion of Aboriginal females (Statistics Canada, 2010).

Aboriginal women in Winnipeg encounter numerous challenges that relate to a long history of colonization, including political oppression, forced cultural assimilation, gender-based stereotyping and displacement (see Aboriginal Justice Implementation Commission, 1999; Aboriginal Council of Winnipeg Inc., 2011; National Collaborating Centre for Aboriginal Health, 2013). Many Aboriginal women have been displaced from their home communities and now reside in Winnipeg’s inner city in unsafe, overcrowded housing, often located in neighbourhoods that lack proper social supports such as reliable transportation and access to healthy foods (Silver 2006; Silver 2007). Disturbing statistics reveal that Aboriginal women living in Winnipeg are among the 43% of Aboriginal women in Manitoba who are living in poverty (Aulinger, 2000). As a result, they are at a higher risk of experiencing income related food insecurity as their food budget is diminished in order to pay for other living costs such as housing (Khosla, 2000). Thus, Aboriginal women living in low-income Winnipeg neighbourhoods face a number of unique challenges when it comes to food acquisition. Harsh Winnipeg winters, an inadequate public transit system, and a lack of affordable healthy food stores in women’s neighbourhoods, all compromise women’s efforts to obtain the necessary food for their families.

Research Partnership and Participants
This research was conducted in partnership with Ka Ni Kanichihk Inc., a community-based, non-profit organization located in the West Alexander inner city neighbourhood of Winnipeg. Ka Ni Kanichihk offers Aboriginal-led, culturally appropriate educational programming with the purpose of helping people recognize their strengths and supporting them to achieve wholeness and wellness through individual and community empowerment programming (www.kanikanichihk.com). In addition to offering youth and men’s programs, Ka Ni Kanichihk offers several day educational programs for Aboriginal women.

The women participants recruited for this project were part of the Honouring Gifts education program, designed for young Aboriginal mothers to develop skills, determine a career or education plan, experience alternative career opportunities and to receive training in a culturally safe and appropriate environment. Interwoven in the Honouring Gifts program is an important life skills component, focused on traditional knowledge, addressing women’s health and well-being, and caring staff that provide counseling and support services that assist women with leaving abusive relationships, addictions and treatment, health care, child care etc. All participants recruited (n=7) for this project self-identified as Aboriginal women, under the age of 30, had one or more children, and were recipients of social assistance.

Methods

Theoretical Framework
Feminist and post-colonial lenses were particularly important to the analytic position used in this research study. Aboriginal communities have been oppressed, exploited and misrepresented by scientific research for generations (Tuhwai Smith, 1999; Absolon & Willet, 2005). Importantly, when conducting research within Aboriginal communities, it is imperative that researchers recognize the underlying power imbalance inherent in their relationship with participants to ensure they respect and use the knowledge that is shared with them appropriately and not exploitative (Tuhwai Smith, 1999). Through the resistance of colonizing research methods, we enable the development of new research methods that reflect Indigenous worldviews and create knowledge that is consistent with Indigenous ways of knowing and being (Absolon & Willet, 2005).

Previous feminist research has shown that women are often viewed in urban discourses as incomplete subjects in need of redemption, rehabilitation or reform (Kern, 2006). From this perspective, even women involved in research can be vulnerable to the effects of patriarchy and colonization (Frisby & Creese, 2011), which combine to produce a discriminatory environment in their urban experiences generally, and food acquisition journeys specifically. Importantly, feminist research methods aim to acknowledge and address the power imbalance between researchers and participants through a focus on inclusive and participatory approaches and bringing often excluded women’s voices to the surface (Frisby et al., 2009). Crucially, feminist researchers must simultaneously reflect critically on how their own underlying biases, knowledge claims, and privilege may influence the research process (Frisby et al., 2009).

Procedures
The research study was conducted using a mixed methods approach to explore and characterize both the physical and social dimensions of foodscapes of low-income Aboriginal women in Winnipeg.

First, fieldwork for the project began by establishing a research partnership with Ka Ni Kanichihk Inc. The fieldwork was conducted in three steps over a five-month period that consisted of two focus group interviews and observational site visits of 10 food providers in Winnipeg. Their participation included two one-hour, semi-structured focus group sessions. A semi-structured style of focus group interview, was used as it is an invaluable tool to help gain information about people’s lived experiences (Travers, 1996). The semi-structured nature of the focus group interviews consisted of the use of prepared direct ques-
tions that I presented in an open-ended manner, in addition to the use of prompts to clarify questions, or to facilitate discussion on an important point raised (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2011).

The first focus group concentrated on the following topics: (1) Locations and types of food providers used most often; (2) Women’s experiences with particular types of food providers such as grocery stores and food banks; (3) Typical weekly/monthly food budget and food purchasing decisions; (4) Barriers to accessing food such as cost, transportation and income; and (5) Discriminatory effects of foodscape environments. The second step of the research involved the characterization of a sample of food providers (n=9) that collectively constitute the foodscape of low-income neighbourhoods in Winnipeg. Observational site visits (n=9) were conducted primarily in the Downtown, Point Douglas, Inkster and St. James-Assiniboia regions of Winnipeg. Figure 1 displays a map of Winnipeg and the locations of food providers visited.

The food providers visited were identified during the first focus group interview as the locations that the participants normally visit to obtain food. These included grocery stores, discount grocers, convenience stores, and food banks. In order to conduct a thorough observation of these foodscape, a checklist was created by the lead researcher consisting of eight categories including: store appearance, store layout, product placement, type of food in store, pricing, staff/security, typical shoppers, and overall conditions of the store. Within each category there were approximately 4-6 variables identified during the observational site visits. Some examples include: price comparisons of three standard products (e.g. Kraft Dinner, Macintosh apples and tomato soup), amount of prepackaged foods (measured in comparison to amount of fresh foods available), product loca-
tions (where packaged versus fresh foods are located) and store security (cameras, guards, or watchful store owners).

The final step in this research included a second focus group interview to share and confirm the credibility and appropriateness of the analysis of the first focus group interview and to assist in further contextualization of the site visit data. The discussion centered on reviewing participants’ key barriers to accessing food; identifying any missing or misinterpreted information; discussing any additional food provisioning experiences in line with the key themes; and finally brainstorming ways we can take action and how we can share our research findings.

Data Analysis
All interview data were digitally recorded and transcribed. The researcher obtained observational site visit data using a checklist during site visits and through recording field notes. A constant comparative analysis (Hay, 2010) was used to analyze all transcripts and field materials. The linking of observational and interview data allowed for the identification of relationships between physical and social geographies, and inference of themes to develop preliminary ideas, concepts and observations (Dey, 1993). The observational data were analyzed by identifying common themes within each type of store visited and then analyzing and coding the field notes from each visit. Importantly, the observational site visit data contextualized the information gathered through the interview data. Finally, the thematic analysis revealed six key barriers that the women who participated in this study experience when accessing food in Winnipeg.

Results

Analyses of the interview data and observational site visits revealed numerous barriers embedded within the social and built environments that constitute women’s foodscapes in Winnipeg. The difficulties women encountered were predicated primarily on the stigmatizing and individualizing effects of poverty, which were further exacerbated by reports of racial discrimination that they faced in their food journeys. Six key barriers emerged from the coding process, including: Transportation, Accessibility, Affordability, Food Environment, Customer Experiences, and Food Quality. Both physical and social geographies that constitute women’s foodscapes are reported for each theme. Table 1 provides a summary of food provider descriptions and four key observations recorded at each type of food provider visited. Women’s experiences and food provider site visit observations are further explored in the following sections.

Transportation
Women’s methods of transportation on their food-provisioning journey often included multiple transportation modes such as walking, public transportation, and the use of taxicabs. None of the women involved in the study had their own personal vehicle to use for obtaining groceries. The women reported that they often took the bus to food providers located further away from their house and then they would often take a taxicab home with their groceries. The cramped and crowded city bus was not able to accommodate women’s grocery shopping transportation needs due to lack of space for themselves and their groceries, or difficulties in carrying a large number of groceries on the bus. Rather, some women (n=5) chose to take a taxicab to get their groceries home.

The cold weather during Winnipeg winters often complicated women’s food journeys as even waiting for the bus for 10 minutes or walking to the convenience store in their neighborhood presented transportation challenges. One woman directly addressed the difficulty experienced by not having a car during the cold Winnipeg winters, by remarking:

“It’s harder in the winter than in the summer to get around. Because you can’t walk anywhere when it’s -40°C. Like come on now, the kids are fine but you’re freezing!”

Accessibility
Women encountered both physical and social barriers in their food provisioning experiences including visits to multiple locations to obtain adequate food and difficulties experienced with food bank procedures, in particular the wait times. Women explained that there were an inadequate number of food providers in their neighbourhoods that allowed for easy access and that visits to multiple locations were required (participants typically listed three or four locations) to obtain all the food their families needed based on their limited budgets. Specifically, the women reported on the limited availability of fruits and vegetables at smaller convenience stores as compared to the larger supermarket or grocery stores.

Each of the women reported having to use a food bank at some point in their lives and revealed experiences associated with obtaining food from food banks which were negative, time consuming and undignified. Participants reported that food banks are only open for a short period of time (i.e. a few hours) once every week or two weeks, that there are often long wait times on the phone to register to receive food and that waiting then continues with long line-ups at the food bank. One woman explained her experience with a food bank:

“I have used before too [food bank]. It’s hard too… you go in there, you have to wait in line for a long time….They open at like 10 and then you are still waiting at like 12:30”

The women were clear in their explanations that not all food providers or food banks they utilized in their food journeys allowed for undignified experiences, only in specific locations. These results provide overwhelming evidence that location has a significant effect on a woman’s ability to not only adequately access the food necessary to achieve a diet that meets her nutritional requirements, but to access these foods in a dignified manner.

Affordability
All the women who participated in this study were recipients of Social Assistance (SA) and reported a limited budget available
Table 1
Summary of food provider site visit observations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Food Provider</th>
<th>Description of food provider type</th>
<th>Store Appearance</th>
<th>Amount of fruits and vegetables vs. Prepackaged food</th>
<th>Type of Security</th>
<th>Overall Experience</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Supermarket</td>
<td>Large; offers fresh foods, deli, bakery, house wares, pharmacy, etc.; “big box” store; located in high traffic suburban areas</td>
<td>Dirty floors; aisles/shelves somewhat crowded; bright lights; large aisles and shopping carts;</td>
<td>Large fruit and vegetable sections but “junk” food often mixed in</td>
<td>Greeter at door in some locations; cameras present</td>
<td>Large stores with large parking lots; good variety of items; locations visited in suburban neighbourhoods (i.e. not inner city)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discount Grocer</td>
<td>Grocery store that offers discounted prices for groceries, clothing, house wares, etc.</td>
<td>Crowded; dirty floors; boxes everywhere; stuff jammed in tiny aisles</td>
<td>Small fruit and vegetable in some; hard to locate</td>
<td>Walk-through security scanner; barred entrance windows</td>
<td>Aimed to appease budget conscious shoppers; extremely crowded store; low percentage of healthy food</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Convenience Store</td>
<td>Smaller stores often located in highly accessible or lower income neighbourhoods; offer range of goods but may be higher priced than traditional grocery stores</td>
<td>Floor dirty; stuff on floor; crowded aisles; no real organization of sections;</td>
<td>Mainly pre-packaged foods; mostly “unhealthy” foods (i.e. candy, chips, ice cream, pop)</td>
<td>Barred windows and doors; extra staff monitoring customers</td>
<td>Appear to be heightened security in inner-city locations; small selection of fresh foods (i.e. fruits and vegetables)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Food bank</td>
<td>Charitable food distribution system in Winnipeg; most located in churches or community centres</td>
<td>Small building; crowded tables with food boxes</td>
<td>Almost all prepackaged food; one wilted head of lettuce in boxes; some boxes had one banana or one apple</td>
<td>Friendly staff, helpful</td>
<td>Not enough food for amount of families in need; lack of fresh foods and quality nutritious foods</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
for food. The women discussed how the SA they receive is not enough to cover all their basic costs such as food, rent, childcare, utilities, etc., and that they often must choose between paying their phone bill or paying their rent. One woman remarked that all other costs seem to go up (housing, food, rent) but not SA levels. Another woman spoke about the daily struggle on a limited income:

“You know like you’re not supposed to live comfortable on assistance but come on, you’re not supposed to struggle every day just to feed the kids and clothe them.”

Due to their limited budget, participants noted that the cost of food at certain locations is prohibitive and although certain food providers, such as mainstream grocery stores, may be more convenient to shop at, they are often not seen as economically feasible. Women may seek out food providers if they have specific items on sale, or that are more affordable, thus adding time and inconvenience to their food journeys. For example, one of the participants explained that in addition to visiting grocery stores, she also visits a specialty butcher shop to purchase low-cost, quality meat. The site visits contextualized the women’s reports of a proliferation of unhealthy food present at all types of food providers in highly accessible areas. As one woman explained, it is often the snack foods that are on sale and thus the most affordable:

“Brick cheese at every place is like $8.00 or $9.00. No matter where it is, it is all expensive. Most of that stuff is the same everywhere. The stuff that’s on sale is drinks, chips.”

Food Environments

Food environments, including the physical setting and layout of stores and other providers, affected women’s foodscapes. Several women reported that the locations of essential food providers or food banks are inaccessible. They are often located in church basements that do not accommodate the long lines and wait times inherent with food bank use. The women revealed that certain food banks offer more dignified environments if they provide food that is prepackaged and ready for them to pick up. This is opposed to a common ‘free for all’ setting in the majority of food banks where there is no pre packing of food and women must compete for a limited amount of available food.

Additionally, the layout of food stores impacted the women’s shopping experience. Women reported that certain food providers and food banks offer clean and inviting environments, whereas other spaces are cramped, dirty and uninviting. Paradoxically, often the providers that were most accessible and affordable were the least attractive. One woman shared her experience in a downtown Winnipeg convenience store where she shops:

“And it’s so jam packed in there and I mean it’s so cluttered in there you can’t even like walk around! You can’t even bring your stroller in there or nothing”

Two convenience stores were visited in the downtown core of Winnipeg to observe the conditions reported by the women. During the first focus group interview, women revealed negative experiences connected to the layout of food convenience stores, such as overcrowding of aisles and dirty floors. Observations revealed that the locations the women discussed indeed were cramped, had dirty floors, messy shelves and the walls and doors were barred in three of the locations visited.

Customer Experience

Customer experiences during food journeys were affected by factors such as discrimination, lack of respect, and accusations of theft. Four women noted experiences that included undignified interactions with staff at food stores and food banks where they encountered racism, rude treatment, and disrespectful remarks. The women participants reported that it appears the food bank staff and volunteers often take the best quality food or give more to friends or family. Furthermore, they reported experiences at certain food providers or food banks made them feel discriminated against for perceived reasons such as race, income level, career or gender.

The participants explained that at some grocery store locations, staff treated them with the assumption that they had stolen something or anticipated they would steal something. The inner city stores visited (n=3) had various signs in the store windows indicating cameras were present, that all bags must be left at the front of the store, and had multiple security cameras and several staff members watching carefully. Several women reported incidences that confirmed the site visit observations of heightened security, including one woman’s experience of unjust theft accusation at a major retailer in Winnipeg:

“The woman [store clerk] said ‘Oh, can I see what’s in your stroller’ and I’m like ‘why, like I don’t care, look in my stroller’…they think that every Aboriginal…it’s Aboriginal people only it seems like because I see other people that are going in there…it’s the Aboriginal/Native big thief or something…they look in your stroller and there is nothing in there.”

Unfortunately this participant shared that this has happened on numerous occasions while out shopping with her kids and stroller.

Food Quality

Finally, the women reported that the quality of available food in stores and food banks within their neighbourhoods is lacking. The site visit observations revealed a lack of quality fruits and vegetables in inner city convenience stores, discount grocers, and food banks as compared to the amount of packaged foods available. Not only was there a limited selection of fruits and vegetables observed at the discount grocers and convenience stores, much of it appeared wilted and close to expiration. Site visit observations at the discount grocery stores revealed a limited fruit and vegetable selection often difficult to locate amidst the packaged foods in the store.
most women (n=6) said that they often do not receive enough quality fruits, vegetables or milk from food banks to adequately feed themselves and their families. For example, a site visit of one food bank in the inner city found that the food packages consisted of one head of wilted romaine lettuce, while the rest of the food was prepackaged goods such as cereal, macaroni and cheese, and day old baked goods such as muffins. Conversations with the volunteers at the food bank revealed that the observed lack of fruit and vegetables was not out of the ordinary, as they do not receive enough fresh foods to provide for food bank users. The results suggest that compared to the amount of packaged food offered, there is not an adequate selection of fresh fruits and vegetables needed for a healthy diet. Contrary to many stereotypes that often plague food insecure women, these deficiencies were not an outcome of a lack of women’s knowledge or effort. For example, several women (n=4) reported that food obtained from food banks often does not meet basic quality standards as canned foods may be dented and the food given away at food banks is sometimes expired to the point that it had occasionally made them ill. One woman explained her experience with receiving expired food from a food bank:

“Yeah they give you food [food bank] but sometimes it’s expired. It’s not healthy to eat.”

The lived experiences shared by the women participants provide evidence of the complexity of food insecurity as experienced by a small group of low-income Aboriginal single mothers in Winnipeg. The racialized nature of food environments, inequitable charitable food distribution systems, transportation challenges and inadequate government systems and supports (i.e. Social Assistance) are perceived to contribute to discriminatory foodscapes in Winnipeg. The effects of discrimination as revealed through women’s experiences while provisioning food for their families reveal how undignified experiences have the potential to negatively affect women’s self-esteem, health and well-being.

Discussion

This research study has attempted to provide a geographically contextualized analysis of food insecurity that focuses on social and physical geographic characteristics that accompany food-provisioning experiences in one locale in Canada. The results provide an important geographic analysis of the social determinants of food insecurity as encountered by Aboriginal women such as inadequate income assistance, racialized grocery-shopping experiences, poverty, and under supported charitable food systems.

As revealed by the interview data, the women reported a lack of available income as one of the main determinants in their ability, or rather inability, to adequately obtain the food resources they needed for their families. According to Kirkpatrick and Tarasuk (2008), existing evidence reveals that in order to adequately address the income related causes of food insecurity we must implement better social assistance programs and increase minimum wage levels in order to improve people’s capacity to purchase their own food.

The physical geographic context was revealed to play a significant role in women’s food journeys. Ranging from the distance and transportation methods women utilized to obtain food to the physical layouts of stores and food banks, it is evident that women’s dignity has the potential to be compromised. Women revealed the difficulties associated with using multiple modes of transportation and the associated monetary and weather-related challenges of traveling throughout the city to access food. Issues in transportation to access basic resources were reported in the Jacobson et al. (2009) study of low-income residents in inner-city Toronto, as they found the mode of transportation was important to one’s dignity and walking was identified as the least dignified mode of transportation. Public transit may be considered a more dignified mode of transport than walking; however, issues still arise such as the affordability of a bus fare. Winnipeg Transit’s rates currently set at $2.40 per trip for an adult (2011), can be a burdensome cost to low-income people.

Moreover, the results provide recognition of the underlying theme of human dignity that encompasses both the physical and social geographies of food journeys of Aboriginal women in Winnipeg. The lived experiences reported by the women in this research study revealed many undignified experiences were encountered during food journeys, ranging from racism encountered while grocery shopping, unjustified theft accusations while shopping, to rude comments received from food bank volunteers. Rooted in the food journeys of Aboriginal women in Winnipeg is preliminary evidence of the systematic racial and gender discrimination that women encounter within their neighbourhood environments that impact their ability to be food secure.

The findings of this study can be used to expand on the mental health effects of food insecurity that women experience as related to human dignity. As outlined in the Social Determinants of Health: The Canadian Facts, Mikkonen and Raphael (2010) note that food security is directly tied to a person’s health and human dignity. The importance of dignity as a determinant of food security and health points toward potential policy implications that might address not only physical barriers, but also discriminatory environments and practices that constrain women’s food journeys in the city. The concept of ‘food dignity’ can be used to explain how undignified food experiences manifest into negative health outcomes, which challenges the conventional approaches to food security such as measuring nutritional inadequacies (Tarasuk, 2001; Travers, 1996).

Importantly, the prolonged engagement with Ka Ni Kanichhk over a six-month time period provided a unique opportunity to come together to discuss ways that women can start to take action and make positive changes for themselves, for other mothers, and for members of their community. For example the women shared recommendations on making food banks easier to use such as offering more frequent pick up times, equitable distribution of food resources, and healthier food options. During our second focus group interview we discussed ways we
could share the finding of our research such as writing letters to
grocery stores, transportation companies, phone calls to grocery
store managers, i.e. Winnipeg transit, and developing further
reports. Additionally, the women shared resourceful informa-
tion with each other such as community organizations that offer
resources and assistance, food bank locations with good food
and friendly staff, and even places to avoid, i.e. stores that sell
expired food, undesirable food bank locations.

Issues such as accessibility and affordability are often mea-
sured by Euclidean distances in mapping proximity to food
stores (Ball et al., 2009) or identifying food deserts (Larsen &
Gilliland, 2008), but not often by the lived experiences that also
constitute a key part of women’s food journeys. Geographers
such as Edward Soja (2010) have challenged these reductionist
proclivities by calling for a re-invigoration of a theory of spatial
justice within geography that enables the examination of space
relations beyond instrumental definitions of distance and distri-
bution. Following this vein, the concept of foodscape can be
viewed as a key component of spatial injustice as place (e.g.
neighbourhood settings) affects, and is affected by, women’s ef-
forts to achieve a food secure status. The foodscape concept has
been helpful in articulating both the physical and social geogra-
phies of women’s experiences of food insecurity. This research
study has provided an exploratory analysis of food journeys as
experienced by a small number of Aboriginal women in Win-
nipeg, which helps us to understand the depth and complexity of
the food insecurity they experience.

Limitations

Importantly, two key limitations for this study must be noted.
First, this research investigation reports on the lived experiences
of a small sample of low-income Aboriginal women living in
Winnipeg. The results cannot be generalized to the entire popu-
lation of low-income food insecure Aboriginal women in Win-
nipeg but suggest, rather, that these women are not alone in the
experiences that they reported.

Second, the observational site visits were conducted to con-
textualize and provide a physical characterization of the locales
the women discussed during the interview data. The women re-
ported on their experiences within those places and, although the
site observations confirmed the women’s characterizations, it is
important to note that each individual will interpret a locale and
experience differently.

Conclusion

According to Raphael et al. (2008), we characterize health prob-
lems at the individual level rather than at the societal level in
Canada. In order to adequately address the health effects of food
insecurity, solutions must be focused on the structural changes
needed to alleviate poverty (Tarasuk, 2001). To this end, the
findings of this study provide insight into the discriminatory pat-
terns of foodscape in the city, which are useful for policymak-
ers, food activists and communities in promoting healthier food
options for Aboriginal women living in low-income neighbour-
hoods. Additional research can be used to expand on the ‘food-
scape’ concept in relation to urban social justice and how this
concept can be used to examine the social, cultural and political
forces that underlie food insecurity, and the resulting negative
consequences that affect the health, dignity and overall well-
being of Aboriginal women.

The combination of gender and racial-based discrimina-
tion has created an atmosphere in Winnipeg where Aboriginal
women are confronted with geographies of indignity in their ev-
eyday food journeys. Despite these challenges, women in the
Aboriginal community of Winnipeg continue to be the strong,
powerful voices that advocate for change in their communities.

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