Women’s labor and the transformative potential of alternative agrifood

Rebecca L. Som Castellano
Assistant Professor of Sociology
Boise State University

Abstract
Gender as a social category continues to play a key role in determining the allocation of power and privilege in society. Despite this fact, gender has gone relatively unexamined in agrifood scholarship, including research examining resistance in the agrifood system and the transformative potential of alternative agrifood. While some scholarship has focused on gender in the public sphere (i.e. women as farmers, women as farmworkers, women as restaurant workers), very little research has been attentive to gender dynamics in the private sphere as it relates to agrifood system resistance. This is particularly problematic given recent concerns about the economization of the individual within alternative agrifood.

This paper draws from a research project which examined the ways in which traditional gender norms are perpetuated within and by households that engage in alternative agrifood practices, in order to examine the relationship between alternative agrifood engagement and the mental labor of food provisioning for women. Qualitative methods are employed in the analysis using data gathered from Ohio residents. Findings suggest that engaging in alternative agrifood is more mentally laborious for women, particularly women with lower incomes, women with children, women with partners, and women who are employed. The paper concludes by considering how the failure to consider the legacy of patriarchy and contemporary practices related to gender inequality in the private sphere limits market based approaches to agrifood system change, but also the ways in which we must move beyond the focus on individuals when considering resistance to corporate agrifood.
Introduction

Gender as a social category continues to play a key role in determining the allocation of power and privilege in society (Lindsey 2015). Despite this fact, gender has been relatively unexamined in agrifood scholarship, including research examining the dynamics of dominance and resistance in the agrifood system and the transformative potential of alternative agrifood. While some scholarship has focused on gender in the public sphere (i.e. women as farmers, women as farmworkers, women as restaurant workers) (e.g. Chiappe and Flores 1998; Lobao and Meyer 1995; Sachs 1996; Sachs, et al 2014), very little research has been attentive to gender dynamics in the private sphere as it relates to resistance to the corporate agrifood system. Examining gender dynamics in the sphere of consumption is an important consideration for scholarly work focused on popular forms of resistance to global agrifood, in part because women continue to perform a great deal of the labor involved in this resistance (Cairns, et al 2013; Little, et al 2009; Som Castellano 2015).

The objectives of this paper are to (1) discuss current research on the gendered labor of food provisioning amongst those engaged in alternative agrifood, (2) to present original research on the mental labor of food provisioning which expands our current understanding of this labor, and (3) to discuss the gendered labor of food provisioning within alternative agrifood as it relates to the economization of the individual and the current strategies of resistance to the neoliberal food regime. In so doing, we can further problematize (or question) the degree to which resistance to the status quo of the global agrifood system is effecting change.

Resistance to corporate agrifood and labor in the sphere of consumption

In many regards women bear the brunt of the labor involved in producing and reproducing resistance to the status quo of the global agrifood system, particularly in the sphere of consumption. Research has found that women remain predominantly responsible for the labor of food provisioning amongst households that engage in alternative agrifood, and this is particularly true for households that support local food systems (Cairns, et al 2013; Som Castellano 2015). Food provisioning refers to the mental, physical and emotional labor involved in planning meals, procuring food, cooking, and cleaning up after meals. Research has also found that women who engage in local food systems exert greater physical and emotional labor in food provisioning, and that this importantly varies by a range of socio-demographic factors, including socio-economic status, having children, having a partner, and being employed (Som Castellano 2015; Som Castellano forthcoming). However, questions remain about the labor of food provisioning for alternative agrifood participants, such as how the mental labor of food provisioning is influenced by alternative agrifood engagement. Further, much of the current work, including my own work, calls for greater gender equality in order to improve justice in the agrifood system, and strengthen current efforts that resist corporate agrifood. However, this needs to be problematized, particularly given the ways in which resistance to alternative agrifood remains embedded within a neoliberal ideology. In the remainder of this essay, I first discuss findings related to the mental labor of food provisioning as women engage in alternative agrifood. I then discuss these findings in relation to current literature that discusses the economization of the individual and resistance to the global agrifood systems.
The mental dimension of food provisioning

DeVault (1991) noted in her seminal work *Feeding the Family* that food provisioning involves a complex process of taking into account the needs and desires of others, as well as engaging in food provisioning practices in accordance with what a person considers a proper meal, which includes a cultural and normative context. Much of this labor is mental, and involves determining “what is required and how much to do” (DeVault 1991: 122). In addition the mental labor of food provisioning involves paying attention to the tastes of family members. Furthermore, food provisioning is not static, but involves monitoring, which adds to the mental dimension. As DeVault (1991) notes,

Routines for provisioning evolve gradually out of decisions that are linked to the resources and characteristics of particular households and to features of the market. The routine is made to work through monitoring activities that fit the regularly occurring categories of routine to specific events from one day to another. Monitoring also provides a continual testing of typical practices. This testing occurs as shoppers keep track of changes on both sides of the relation: household needs and the products available (84).

Thus, the mental dimension involves taking into account the needs and desires of others, planning meals in line with material realities and culture, as well as negotiating with the changing agrifood system.

Scholars have asserted that alternative agrifood engagement involves reflexivity, where consumers consider an array of characteristics when provisioning food (Murdoch and Miele 2004: 158). Thus, food provisioning for those engaged in alternative agrifood involves an even wider array of considerations, such as the social and ecological impacts of provisioning certain types of foods in particular ways. For example, a person may want to consider the ecological and social conditions that coffee was produced under, and then provision that product (or opt out of provisioning that product) accordingly. Therefore, the mental labor of food provisioning is likely even greater for women engaged in alternative agrifood. This is likely even more true for women that are highly engaged, and/or women that have a broader range of concerns that extend beyond purchasing organic foods. This is in part because organic certification has taken some of the mental labor out of the work, and also because certified organic foods have become increasingly available. Take, for example, the fact that Costco is currently the largest retailer of certified organic foods in the US (Gonzalez 2015).

Other factors may complicate the mental labor of food provisioning for women as they engage in alternative agrifood. For example, having a lower social class and/or being a racial or ethnic minority may limit the access that women have to desired foods and food practices, potentially adding to the mental labor involved. Having children and partners can also complicate the mental labor of food provisioning. Conceptually, intersectionality illuminates these dynamics, as it is probable that it is the intersection of these factors that contribute to the mental labor of food provisioning. As Arendell (2000) notes, “Having limited or no access to class and racial privilege constricts the range of options and resources available to minority mothers” (191).
Employment status and age may also contribute to the mental labor of food provisioning for women. I argue that engagement in alternative agrifood further contributes to the mental labor of food provisioning, and varies based on these factors.

**Food provisioning as carework and individualization in alternative agrifood**

Women remain engaged in the labor of food provisioning in large part because they are socialized to be caregivers. A carework perspective calls our attention to the ways in which women are socialized to be the ones that provide care in US society, and beyond (Andersen 2011). Providing food for others is one of the primary ways that women show care to family and friends. By doing so, they not only provide caloric needs and nourishment, they also construct family and society more broadly (Julier 2004). I argue that women also construct alternative agrifood via their food provisioning, and by doing so provide care not only for the benefit of family and friends, but also for environmental and social well-being.

Fulfillment of gendered expectations occurs within a society where individuals are expected to assume moral responsibility for their actions (Ronen 2008). This responsibility extends to the agrifood system. As Bonanno and Busch (2015) note,

> Dismissing structural constraints and power relations, individuals are seen as endowed with the ability to fully define their actions. And solutions to problems are increasingly assigned to the individual sphere (individualization). In this context, the organization and management of agri-food is increasingly placed in the hands of private corporate actors while solutions to problems and alternatives are shifted to the initiative of individual consumers (4).

Many scholars have also noted the individualization of addressing agrifood system problems. Kneafsey, et al (2013), for example, argue that resistance activities, such a localized food systems, focus attention on the role of consumer. Others have noted the role that consumers can, and at times should, play in actively participating in and shaping the food system (e.g. Seyfang 2008). This stands in opposition to consumers being passive receivers, or simply demanding shoppers.

Thus women not only fulfill gendered expectations as they engage in food provisioning within alternative agrifood, they also fulfill expectations prescribed by a society embedded in a neoliberal ideology. This ideology extends to alternative agrifood given this emphasis on individuals engaging in change making, and directing the market.

This individualization of problem solving in agrifood can have effects at micro and macro levels. At the micro level, it may extend undue burden on certain individuals. For example, in the case of alternative agrifood and the sphere of consumption, women may be unfairly burdened with the labor of food provisioning. And these added roles and responsibilities could impact their health and well-being given that multiple roles and responsibilities can impact physical and mental health, as well as economic opportunities (Bird 1999; Coltrane 2000; Hook 2010). At the macro level, this individualization of responsibility could limit the scaling up of resistance, and prevent governments and corporations from being held responsible for or working to address
the problems created and sustained by global agrifood (Bruce and Som Castellano under review).

Methods

In order to examine the mental labor of food provisioning for women engaged in AFNs, I utilize data gathered from in-depth interviews with 43 women across the state of Ohio. The interviews were audio recorded and transcribed and then coded and categorized with the assistance of MaxQDA, a qualitative data analysis computer program. Interview participants had a range of agrifood system concerns and varying levels of alternative agrifood engagement, which allowed me to evaluate how alternative agrifood engagement influences the mental labor of food provisioning. Respondents were also diverse with regards to socio-economic status, race/ethnicity, age, partnership status, presence of children, geography, and employment status, which allowed for further evaluation of how socio-demographic characteristics interact with engagement in alternative agrifood to influence the mental labor of food provisioning.

Results

The data suggest that women engaged in alternative agrifood, particularly those that are highly engaged in resistance activities, experience heightened mental labor in food provisioning. Many of the women who were less engaged in alternative agrifood reported that their food system concerns did not add much additional mental effort in their food provisioning. Many stated that there was some additional time involved in reading labels, and they did tend to prioritize fresh, and from scratch foods, which they reported as adding to the mental labor of planning and implementing meals. However, compared to women who were highly engaged in resistance activities, they were less likely to report that their agrifood concerns added to the mental labor of food provisioning.

On the other hand, the women I spoke with who were highly engaged in alternative agrifood practices consistently reported that this engagement frequently increased the mental labor of food provisioning. As one woman stated that, “Yeah It's hard to have values. And it's hard to try and live them.” I elaborate in more detail about the ways in which alternative agrifood engagement influenced the mental labor of food provisioning below.

Women spoke about the specific tasks involved in food provisioning, and how their engagement in alternative agrifood practices heightened them. For example, women reported that their agrifood system concerns added to the mental labor of planning. As one woman stated, “In some ways I am always planning, thinking about meals and food, what I am going to provide at each meal, is it healthy, do we have what we need, am I using foods I feel good about, that kind of stuff.” Other women similarly reported the mental dimension of food provisioning to be more labor intensive because of practices related to engagement in alternative agrifood practices. For example, some women mentioned prioritizing in season foods and the mental labor involved. As one woman stated, “it is more work to think about
what is in season, and what we should be eating right now, rather that I will get strawberries whenever I want to get strawberries – um, so it is definitely more work procuring the food.”

Some women also spoke about the added mental labor of other alternative agrifood practices, such as getting to know your farmer. One woman stated that,

And then there is that whole know your farmer, which is a whole other layer to it, layer it is like straddling like the local and organic thing, it is on you to know who these people are and build a relationship with them and then purchase their product. Like take your one day off a week to chat up a farmer, and figure that out.

At times, respondents would speak about how they spent more time and effort in food provisioning, relative to others. As one respondent stated, “I know I definitely spend a ton more effort and a ton more time compared to the majority of Americans in order to find what I want, where I want.” This extra effort involved mental labor, in addition to emotional and physical labor.

Many women who were highly engaged in alternative agrifood believed that the physical and mental labor of food provisioning would be easier if they were not so concerned or engaged with the agrifood system. For example, one woman stated that “I could just shop at Wal-Mart and buy paint, clothes and vegetables all at the same place – which, that totally freaks me out like I just that is just terrifying to me, but I feel like, of course, you know, it would be easier to do that.” In this case, there would be less mental labor in determining what to purchase where.

Women with lower incomes often had to engage in significant mental labor because of budget constraints. As one woman stated,

Well, it is always this complicated imprecise mental arithmetic of like priorities, like now at Kroger for the eggs they have like three choices there is the normal factory farm eggs and they have the cage free that are a dollar more and then for 2 or 3 dollars more they have the cage free and grain fed, so I have decided apparently if chickens live in cages or not but not about what they eat. I have kind of a system I guess for produce or vegetables it is sort of arbitrary but for dairy or eggs and I rarely buy meat but for dairy and eggs I really exclusively stick to local, like buying [local] milk and I get farmers’ market eggs, like I almost never buy eggs in Kroger – I used to buy Kroger milk when I didn’t have food stamps but now I splurge on the nicer milk, because I have excess money so I feel like I can do that, because it is really important to me

For many women with lower incomes, or even middle income women, they had to shop at a wide variety of places in order to obtain the foods they wanted within their budgets, and this running around involved some important mental calculations about what could be purchased where, and for how much. As one woman stated, “Yea, yea, um, I mean if I could do all of my shopping at [the local natural grocery store and farmers’ market] that would be great, but it is more expensive, and my budget says no.”
Having a partner and a child or children also influenced the mental labor of food provisioning. For example, it was often more mental labor to accommodate the preferences of family members. One woman stated that, “my family does not always eat the way I do, so part of our problem is, I often cook multiple foods for a meal.” The cooking of multiple meals also requires the planning of multiple meals, and thus increased the mental labor involved in aligning food preferences, cost, shopping, and the execution of the meal. Teenagers in particular were difficult to please, and mothers with older children were more likely to report compromising their values because of their children’s preferences and utilizing greater mental effort in order to please everyone in the family. A mother with two teenagers stated that, “Like especially with my kids, they just don’t like the healthy food as much as I do. So, it’s a real battle. As I said, I’ve kind of figured out what they like, and so I try to have that.”

Employment also acted as a constraint for some women, and at times also added to the mental labor of food provisioning. As one woman stated, “I think some of what [alternative agrifood proponents] propose, too, is just really, really impractical for someone who works…” In addition, employment and having children often intersected to add to the mental labor of food provisioning for women engaged in alternative agrifood. For example, for women who worked outside of the home, negotiating daycare often added to the mental labor of food work. Women spoke about having to constantly monitor what food was being offered at day care, and exerting great labor, including mental labor, in order to align these offerings with their food provisioning ideals. One woman illustrated this when she stated that,

Daycare makes it really hard. And unfortunately we don’t have any family or friends that could watch him so he’s in a center-based daycare. So that makes things interesting. Because we don’t like what they serve, so we try and find out what they are going to serve ahead of time, and make a healthier version for our son to take so he doesn’t feel left out.

In all this qualitative data suggests that alternative agrifood engagement can increase the mental labor of food provisioning for some women. The mental labor also importantly varies by other factors, such as income, presence of children, having a pattern, and being employed. Thus, it is not only the physical and emotional labor that is impacted by agrifood resistance activities, but the mental labor as well.

Discussion and conclusion

One intention of this mini conference is to foster discussion about the limits of resistance in agrifood, and to engage in critique regarding “how far” “resistance can go in term of opposing global agrifood systems. It was the aim of this paper to discuss an important limit of resistance in agrifood – the reliance on women as a source of labor in the sphere of consumption, and the labor they engage in, including the mental labor.

The findings presented here build on previous research, and provide further evidence that engagement in alternative agrifood is labor intensive for women in the sphere of consumption.
Women remain responsible for the labor of food provisioning as they engage in alternative agrifood, and the labor is more physically, emotionally and mentally laborious.

As noted above, the gendered individualization of problem solving in agrifood can have effects at micro and macro levels. At the micro level, it may extend undue burden on certain individuals. As the data here demonstrate, women in alternative agrifood are engaging in extended mental, physical and emotional food provisioning labor. This added labor can negatively influence women’s well-being, given the added roles and responsibilities involved (Bird 1999; Coltrane 2000; Hook 2010; Som Castellano forthcoming).

A number of problems emerge at the macro level as well. By engaging in alternative agrifood women in many cases are attempting to alter the current market relations of global agrifood. But in doing so they are reinforcing traditional gender norms, which is potentially problematic for women in achieving parity of life chances and life experiences. Further, because of the ways in which resistance to corporate agrifood has been embedded in a neoliberal ideology, as women engage in these resistance activities they are also reinforcing the neoliberal project. As noted above, the neoliberal project reduces change making to individual action. As Bonanno and Busch (2015) note, opposition to the neoliberal food regime has “been shaped and contained by the ideological and political power of neoliberalism” (5). This individualization of responsibility could limit the scaling up of resistance to global agrifood. Alternative agrifood relies on this gendered labor, which is essential for the functioning and survival of this resistance. But some women may be unable to take on this additional labor, particularly women with lower incomes, women with children, women who are employed, and those with partners, thus potentially limiting resistance to alternative agrifood (Bruce and Som Castellano under review).

Thus, calls for improving the status quo of gendered labor within alternative agrifood by shifting gender norms is insufficient. From the standpoint of improving gender inequality, this may suffice, as having men participate more in the carework of food provisioning within alternative agrifood could help address the ways in which this gendered labor may negatively influence the physical and mental well-being of women, or the ways in which it limits women from achieving parity in the public sphere. However, when it comes to the question of resistance to corporate agrifood, this solution is insufficient. The problem is greater than women’s limited capacity to take on additional labor within resistance projects, or the ways in which this gendered labor may limit the broadening of this resistance. Under neoliberalism, gender inequality has worsened (van Gellecum, et al 2008), and we must remain attentive to issues of gender. But we also need to move beyond the individual when considering how to resist corporate agrifood.

Scholars have asserted for many years that we must bring the state back in and hold corporations accountable for the damage they do. And this view is also shared by consumers. In research published by Kneafsey, et al (2013), consumers viewed the government “as having a moral obligation to protect them from the “market” or the “food system” – protect them from the forces that supposedly give them so much autonomy” (111).
In conclusion, resistance to global agrifood is limited in part because of the ways in which gender continues to structure activity with alternative agrifood. However, the issue cannot simply be solved by addressing gendered labor at the individual labor. Rather, we need to move beyond ideas of empowerment, agency and reflexivity, and call greater attention to the role of government and corporate responsibility.

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