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Family History, Cultural Custom, and Personal Preference: The Accents of Food Access in Oxford, Mississippi

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FAMILY HISTORY, CULTURAL CUSTOM, AND PERSONAL PREFERENCE: THE ACCENTS OF FOOD ACCESS IN OXFORD, MISSISSIPPI

By

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DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to the stories of the people who were never asked to share them. May we ask them while they're here, and remember them when they leave.

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ABSTRACT

JAMES B. HIRSCH: Family History, Cultural Custom, and Personal Preference: The Accents of Food Access in Oxford, Mississippi (Under the direction of John Conlon, PhD)

Contemporary food access literature in the social sciences centers on models of food decisions emphasizing income, prices, distance, and time. To challenge this analysis, this research conducts interviews with six residents of Oxford, Mississippi, focused on their food habits. These interviews have been summarized, and motivating factors have been extracted and compared back to the literature's findings. The motivating factors found through the interviews include perceived differences in food quality, store opening/closing hours, partner/family preferences, family/cultural influences, and perceived risks from the COVID-19 pandemic. In contrast to the literature, spaciotemporal concerns were less dominating among participants than the above factors, leading to results opposing the intuition from the literature.

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I: Introduction

"advise if this be worth
Attempting, or to sit in darkness here
Hatching vain empires." (Milton, 1667)

Much like Milton's assembly of demons, economists have a tendency to remain overly reliant on their "vain empires" (i.e. models, theories, predictions), often despite the realities of the world around them. This separation has made economists the butt of many a joke from other social scientists, and has distanced the discipline from both the rest of the academy and from the world outside of the ivory tower. This thesis seeks to shine some light on a corner of that darkness.

Those who spend any length of time with people older than themselves find stories in the silence: a rich tapestry of personal anecdote, oral history, and folklore weaved through the real or perceived experiences of the speaker. In direct comparison to the valuable (but isolating) work of economic modeling, discussions with people on their decision-making processes is simultaneously grounding and confusing. Stories are complicated because people are complicated, because reality is complicated. Models are simple because we make them so. Certainly, neither of these processes are perfect, but perhaps there are lessons to be learned from practitioners of both methodologies.

Food is perhaps the most interesting area to examine the interplay between the simplicity of the model and the complexities of the story. The process of procuring, preparing, sharing, and consuming food is far more than the checking off of a biological requirement – for many, it is a deeply personal process. Recipes, practices, and habits are

often passed down from generation to generation, informed by culture and past experience, and nuanced by income and other access limitations.

To find some of these personal food narratives, we move to Oxford, Mississippi, a college town which, like many college towns, has an identifiable distinction between the academy and the world outside its gates. Oxford, home to the state's flagship university, is domicile to 25,000 residents, almost a third of which live in poverty (U.S. Census, 2022). Despite a population which has grown 34% over the past decade, Oxford has just three supermarkets to support both city residents and university students (U.S. Census, 2022). These three supermarkets are simultaneously near and out-of-reach – two (Larson's CashSaver and Kroger) are located less than half a mile from one another, and less than a mile from the historic Oxford Square, with the third (Walmart) located on the other side of town, five miles away, and three miles away from the Square. Using the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA)'s Economic Research Service (ERS) Food Access Research Atlas, of Oxford's eight Census tracts, five have significant numbers of low-income residents, and all five of these are identified as low access to supermarkets (Figure 1).

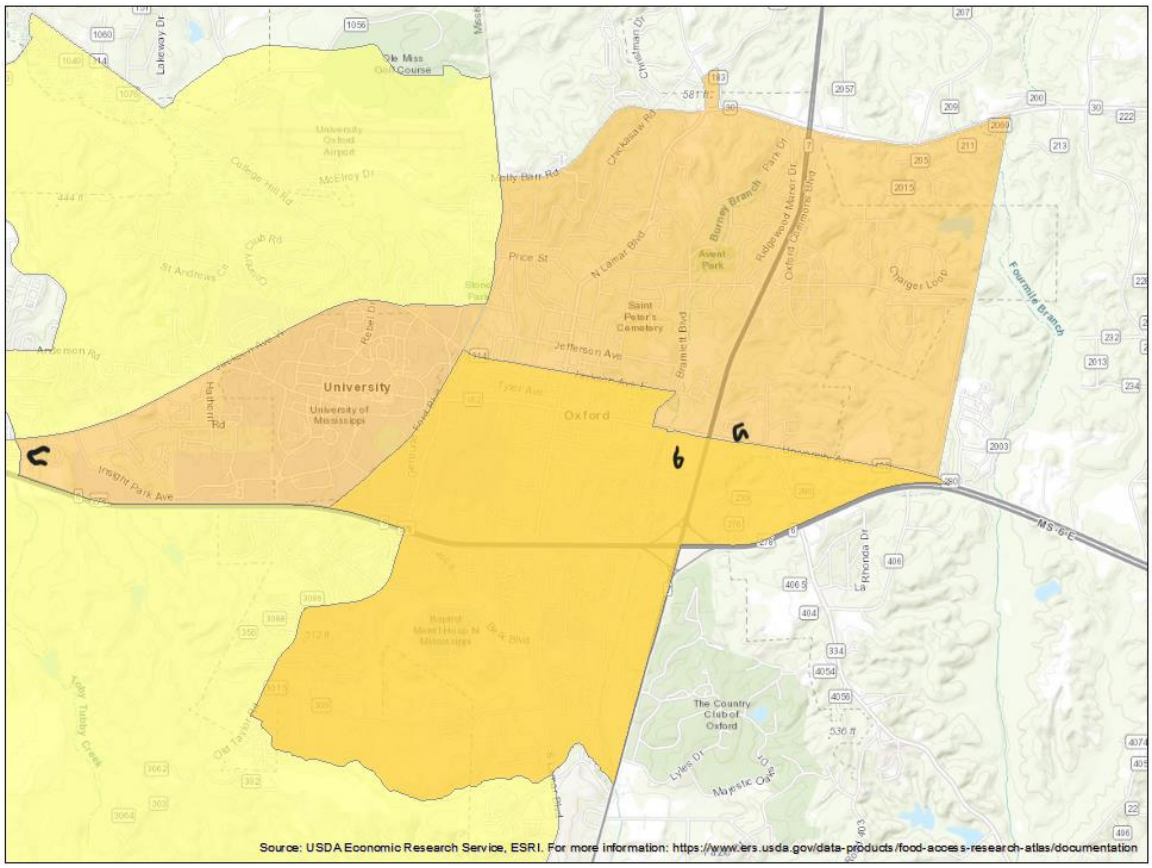

Fig. 1. Oxford, Mississippi, USA

Figure 1 above, from the Food Access Research Atlas, identifies two of Oxford's five low-income tracts as low access, with a significant number of residents more than half a mile from the nearest supermarket (coded in peach), two as low access, resulting from more than 100 households which lack access to a vehicle (coded in yellow), and one as both (coded in orange). The supermarkets within the city limits are represented as Points A (Kroger), B (Larson's), and C (Walmart).

In Oxford, as in many Southern towns, a focus on supermarkets ignores vital parts of the food environment. For example, many residents utilize convenience stores and gas stations, ranging from Chevrons to Dollar Generals, for dry goods, produce, and even animal products like eggs. Still others utilize farmer's markets, like Oxford Community Market, which operates weekly on Tuesdays (from 12-3 in the winter, 3-6:30 in the rest of the year) across the street from Larson's, and Chicory Market, on the north side of town. In Oxford, it's also important to note the existence of periphery food markets for those with access to vehicles: Water Valley to the south, Batesville to the west, and Memphis to the north all offer variety lacking in the town itself, like expanded local-grown food access, wholesale markets, and markets for ethnic minority populations.

Oxford's food geography provides a landscape across which to explore factors affecting food access. This thesis seeks to shed light on how non-economic motivators impact decisions surrounding food access among residents of Oxford, Mississippi. The paper proceeds as follows. In the next section, a review of the existing literature on these topics will reveal the gap which this thesis seeks to fill, leading to a conceptual framework for the work. Next, the presentation of the data and methodology will expand on that framework's use in this project. After drawing conclusions from the data and grounding the results in the literature, a short review will extract recommendations for policymakers and researchers alike.

II: Conceptual Framework and Literature Review

Existing economic and geographic analyses of food access indicate a framework consistent with microeconomic intuition. In short, these theories hold that consumers make food decisions which maximize their utility, given the constraints of time and their income. Food access decisions, then, are based on a person's income, the prices of food, distance from retailers, and that person's food preferences. While the first three factors are important and well-documented parts of the literature, this thesis will attempt to shed light on the fourth. Before getting to that, however, the following section will cover the literature's exploration of the effect of income, food prices, transportation, time, and other economic factors on food access.

It is important to take a second to recognize the terms utilized below by the literature, as opposed to how they will be used in the greater context of the paper. A basic tenant of microeconomics is that consumer decisions are based on utility maximization by rational actors. As a result, when this paper makes references to cost and price, it does so in reference to the accounting meaning of the term (money which is physically spent in the exchange of goods and services). This is opposed to the more general economic sense, where relative prices of goods encapsulate opportunity costs, access costs, and other accounting and non-accounting costs. This paper is generally concerned with relative prices and questions of economic decision-making, but it's important at this point to clarify terms.

Literature Review

Access to food must be considered through several lenses, many of which have been explored by the literature. The first and most obvious of these is cost, expressed as price relative to income. In a meta-analysis of the price and income elasticities of food demand, Fementia (2019), generates a weighted average for demand for each of the major food groups in North America, using income elasticities of demand. Fementia (2019) finds that all food groups studied have positive income elasticites of demand (as income increases, consumer demand in each food group increases). Despite this, Fementia (2019) finds variation in the income elasticities amongst food groups: some (like meat, fruits & vegetables, cereals) are more income elastic than others (oils & fats, dairy). This differentiation means that at higher levels of income, consumers purchase more of all goods, but purchase more elastic goods in greater proportion than less elastic ones.

Also related to cost considerations, Cornelsen et al. (2014) conducts a global meta-analysis of foods' price elasticities of demand. Similarly, reviews of rural food availability, including presence of grocery stores and price, have been conducted by Liese et al. (2007), finding that the vast majority of stores in rural environments are convenience stores, with lower availability of healthful foods, and with products at higher prices. Outside of the rural context, food availability in the U.S. has been studied and related to marginalizing factors, including race and socioeconomic status, by authors such

as Powell et. al, (2007), who found that chain supermarkets are less available in low income, African American, and Hispanic neighborhoods, as opposed to predominantly white, non-Hispanic, and non-low income neighborhoods.

In recent years, increasing focus has turned to the importance of place and its effects on food availability and affordability. Places where supermarkets and other groceries are sparce have been identified as 'food deserts' by the USDA, including sections of Oxford (USDA, 2021). Modeling access by distance from grocery stores is based on observations that consumers utilize markets closest to them when accessing food (Furey, Strugnell, & McIlveen, 2001). Geographic modeling by Russell & Heidkamp (2011) provides a mechanism by which to display the effect of changes in a given food environment, further showing how distance affects food access based on the assumptions about access made.

Another important aspect of food access is not distance, but time. Building on the concept of geographic modeling, Chen & Clark (2013) create 3-dimensional visualizations of space-time access to food, determining an accessible spaciotemporal area around grocers and finding that even considering time, access to transportation and affordability of healthy food are more important determinants of access to food. The effect of store operating hours and transportation times on access have been studied by Hamrick & Hopkins (2012). The authors found that consumers in low-income neighborhoods spent more time accessing food than their peers in non-low-income areas,

and importantly travel to obtain groceries less frequently. Availability has additionally been examined in noted food deserts (places where there are few grocers) and swamps (places where available food is of lower nutritional value), like the Lower Mississippi Delta, by authors like Goodman, Thomson, & Landry (2020), who found that in the five towns studied, most participants shopped at chain grocers farther away from their house, as opposed to grocers closer to them.

Several papers have used changes to the food environment as a way to conceptualize the impact of those changes on access. Cummins et al. (2014) found that the addition of a new grocery store in an urban, low-access neighborhood increased awareness about food availability, but had no significant impact on behavior. Dubowitz et al. (2015) similarly studies the response of an urban community to the addition of a grocery store, finding that while diet and perceptions of food availability improved, those changes could not be tied to the introduction of the store. Russell & Heidkamp (2011) focuses on the effects of the loss of a centrally-located supermarket in New Haven, Connecticut, creating a food desert.

Conceptual Framework

Much of this literature analyzes consumption patterns and access limitations based on the macro: country by country, regional, or municipal data. Even at its most specific, the metric most commonly used to analyze food access is the census tract. These are areas of a county ranging in size from 1,200 to 8,000 residents (U.S. Census Bureau,

2022). The Census Bureau itself states a goal of homogeneity within tracts at establishment (U.S. Census Bureau, 2022). This is why ERS's Food Access Research Atlas measures access at the tract level.

On a conceptual level, note some tension between the interest of the Census Bureau to control the size of census tracts and ensure homogeneity in drawing a tract. Homogenous groupings of people based on location assumes a level of economic segregation between racial and economic groups. This is on its face incorrect, when compared to the reality of living in the rural South, even in relatively larger cities like Oxford. In more rural settings, there is less of everything: less stores, less schools, less churches, and less neighborhoods. That reality means that even in areas with income inequality, availability of resources leads to some level of heterogeneity within a given geographical area. Further, the population range requirements for a tract mean that some counties only have one tract, lumping all residents within the area into one grouping, while larger counties receive more detailed levels of data collection. On this basis, we should be skeptical of the tract's usage in making determinations about access, especially in places like Oxford.

In fact, there are clear empirical differences in the incomes and other demographic characteristics of residents within a tract. Take the tract which holds The University of Mississippi. The residential areas around the University have properties ranging from $50,000 to well over $200,000 (City of Oxford, 2019). The properties with

substantial values (which are presumably owned by high income people), can be compared to on-campus students, who currently have little to no income (but will be higher-income in the future), and renters in apartment complexes around the University, who similarly have lower incomes. In another Oxford tract, located south of University Avenue and east of Gertrude Ford Boulevard, housing values again vary widely: some parcels are valued at well over one million dollars, and others at less than $200,000 (City of Oxford, 2019). Even among homeowners (as opposed to renters), variance in property values may be corelated with differences in income, which are tied to expenditures in other areas (like food). Through these examples, some level of heterogeneity likely exists, at least enough to call into question the literature's assertions about tract-level access trends.

Furthermore, despite an extensive literature on the impact of both real and relative prices on food access decisions, there is no published work which places these factors in the greater context of a person's life in an economically relevant sense. In fact, no paper in the literature incorporates interviews of any kind outside of interviews conducted to determine the direct impact from a change in the food environment (Dubowitz et al., 2015). Importantly, much of the literature hints that not all food decisions are driven simply by price, distance, time, and/or transportation, yet it assumes that those respective factors dominate to the point of exclusion of other factors. The literature fails to engage in a full analysis of the basis upon which people make food access decisions. This paper seeks to at least begin to fill those gaps.

III: Methodology and Data Collection

Methodology

This paper seeks to examine non-economic motivations surrounding food access decisions among residents of Oxford, Mississippi. To do so, the natural methodology is to speak to people. To prevent limiting the information given by participants, the interviews conducted were non-structured and long-form. Participants were recruited through 'daisy-chaining' a recruitment email from persons known to the principal investigator to ones unknown by them. In following best practices for prevention of the spread of COVID-19, all interviews were conducted virtually.

A key part of the methodology of this paper is acknowledging the real impact that participants in this study (including the interviewer) have on one another. Though many parts of the social sciences attempt to limit the impact of the researcher on the data, it seems intuitive that in the case of interviews, this attempt is in vain. The questions asked in interviews are affected by the perspectives and background of the interviewer, and by the reviewers of those questions. The interviewer's appearance, age, affiliation, and other demographic factors may affect the responsiveness of participants. Mistakes and missteps taken in early interviews affect the outcomes of later ones. This paper instead seeks to acknowledge these effects and biases, and a key part of understanding this paper's conclusions is understanding that acknowledgement.

Participant Profiles

This subsection provides background information on the study's participants. All participants are over eighteen, and signified their awareness of their participation's use in this paper. All participants have lived in Oxford for longer than two years, and all have some connection to The University of Mississippi (this seems intuitive given the daisy-chaining used to identify them).

Participant 1 has lived in Oxford for the past six years, and was recruited as a tertiary contact to a University employee. Before coming to Oxford, Participant 1 lived in Union, Mississippi, a small town near Philadelphia, Mississippi, where they lived both with parents and separately from them. Participant 1 is married, and cohabitates with their spouse. Participant 1 lives just outside of Oxford proper, north on Highway 6. Walmart is the closest supermarket to Participant 1.

Participant 2 has lived in Oxford for the past three years, and works at the University in a non-faculty role. Participant 2 has lived in two other cities before, all but Oxford as a minor staying with parents. Participant 2 is unmarried, and lives with three roommates. Participant 2 lives off of Jackson Avenue, and is most closely located to Walmart.

Participant 3 is a five year resident of Oxford, and works as a faculty member at the University. Participant 3 lived with parents in a suburb of Atlanta, GA, growing up, and has lived in Athens, GA, and Blacksburg, VA, as a student, before coming to Oxford. Participant 3 is married, has a young child, and lives with both in Lafayette County. Kroger and Larson's are both closer to Participant 3's domicile than Walmart.

Participant 4 is a six year resident of Oxford, and works as a faculty member at the University. Participant 4 has lived in five states before coming to Oxford.

Participant 5 has lived in Oxford for over thirty years, and is on the faculty at the University. Participant 5 has lived in four states before coming to Oxford. Participant 5 is married, and lives in Oxford proper, closer to Larson's and Kroger than to Walmart.

Participant 6 has lived in Oxford intermittently since 1962, and is a retired person recruited through a secondary University contact. Participant 6 lived in many places as a child, with a parent in the U.S. Armed Forces. As an adult, Participant 6 has lived in Oxford, Memphis, and Texas, the latter two for short periods of time. Participant 6 lives alone, and lives within half a mile of Kroger and Larson's.

The table below, Table 1, displays the above demographic information in a more easily understandable fashion.

Table 1

	Years in Residence	Connection to University	Census Tract	Marital Status
Participant 1	6	Tertiary Connection	North of Jackson Ave., West of County Road 101/N Lamar Blvd.	Married
Participant 2	3	Employee	North of Jackson Ave., West of County Road 101/N Lamar Blvd.	Single
Participant 3	5	Faculty	In Lafayette County, South of campus	Married
Participant 4	6	Faculty	Unclear	Unknown
Participant 5	30	Faculty	East of Oxford Square	Married
Participant 6	60	Secondary Connection	North of University Ave., East of Oxford Square	Single

IV: Major Themes from Interviews

Before analyzing these interviews to determine motivating factors, a few notes on the participant population. The relative homogeneity of the participants eliminates some factors like transportation forms from consideration in the analysis (all participants reported using a personal vehicle most commonly when accessing food in Oxford, and all reported using a family vehicle when accessing food while growing up). Additionally, distance from work is a relative non-factor, since all but two participants work at the University (and one of the two is retired). All participants indicated that they rarely, if ever, use convenience stores or gas stations for accessing food. Despite these considerations, all participants but one reported using different combinations of grocery stores to meet their needs, and all grocers in Oxford are used by one or more participants.

The interviews revealed five motivating factors, the first of which is time. One participant identified time-related issues regarding store layout: the remodeling of Kroger led to a confusing reorganization of items, causing annoyance and costing time. This participant as a result stopped going to that grocer. Additionally, three participants noted that they would prefer using Oxford Community Market (OCM), but are unable to do so because the market's operating hours conflict with work or family obligations (like picking up a child from daycare). This conflict is present in both seasonal schedules of the market (12-3 on Tuesdays in winter and 3-6:30 on Tuesdays in summer), prohibiting all three participants from accessing OCM regularly in both winter and summer.

Also related to OCM, the second motivating factor identified is preference (or lack thereof) for food based on differences in real or perceived quality. All but one participant noted a slight preference for locally-produced food, like that at OCM, but based that preference on support for local farmers. Two participants did note a higher quality of produce at the market. In comparison, no participants expressed a preference for food labelled as organic, with all saying that the cost of such food outweighed any differences in quality. Outside of the organic/local food considerations, several participants also noted a preference for brand name food for certain food items (like macaroni and cheese and other easy-to-make foods), even when brand name food was more expensive. For other food items, like rice and flour, cost considerations dominated the influence of brand.

The third motivator is the preferences/needs of family members. For most of the participants, this means spouses/partners/roommates, and for one participant, a child. All participants reported adapting their preferences to the preferences of their family members, leading to different brand selections or store selections as a result. Some participants noted a distinction in preference rankings between members of the family unit (one partner being more cost sensitive than another). In some cases, the needs of family members cause a shift in the consumption of the household in its entirety, like the participant with a child consuming more vegetables after the child's birth than before as a result of the child's needs. The participant with a child also reported making trips to

Memphis on occasion to take advantage of cost-savings available when purchasing goods in bulk at Costco, trips they did not make before the child's birth.

The fourth factor identified is family/cultural influences. One participant noted making bi-monthly trips to Memphis, where markets with culturally responsive foods are present. Another noted making similar trips for a very different reason: going to Trader Joes, where brand foods the participant is accustomed to from adolescence are available. In both of these situations, the foods purchased on these trips cost more than similar products in Oxford, but the ties to these specific forms of food resulted in the trips despite this impact.

The final motivating factor of note is the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on the food consumption patterns of participants. All participants noted making changes to their consumption as a result of the pandemic. Several shifted from eating out (at a restaurant) to ordering take-away from restaurants. Two reported taking advantage of no-contact shopping methods offered at Walmart and Kroger. One participant reported reducing the frequency of their shopping as a result of the risks the pandemic poses. Another increased the frequency of their shopping, as a large percentage of their food consumption occurs at restaurants. All participants shifted back to their pre-pandemic buying habits when they felt the danger had passed (two do not believe it has to date).

V: Findings and Research Implications

Findings

The most important finding of this paper is the result that (counter to the literature) many of the participants' decision-making factors had less to do with distance, cost, time, or any of the other factors identified in the literature. Rather, their decisions were motivated primarily by family, culture, and personal preference. In several of these situations (traveling to Memphis, preferences for local-grown food, preferences for brand name food as opposed to generics, etc.), these motivators override the intuition to buy food at the closest grocer for the lowest cost.

Secondly, this paper confronts the assumptions of contemporary food access literature's use of the aggregate to comment on the individual. The motivators of the participants in this study (and of many people) when accessing food are far from standard: they are individualized, based on family and personal experience, and nuanced by day-to-day situations. Policy designed around census tract data, assuming low access in a tract (or not), may not be representative of the stories, realities, and decisions of the people who make up that tract. Researchers should be cautious of their usage of census tracts, especially in situations which assume levels of homogeneity between residents in a tract, which may not exist.

Limitations

That being said, this paper does have four key limitations which should be pointed out to the reader. First, the small number of participants limits the ability of the interviewer to adapt questions over time, and increases the probability that this study misses important motivators among Oxford residents. Second, the fact that most participants are tied to the University creates issues for those wishing to use this study to generalize past that population. Without additional investigation into residents outside of these networks, generalizability may be compromised. Third, the recruitment method utilized by the investigator (daisy-chaining) is unlikely to fully capture the richness of Oxford's demographic or food motivation diversity. Work to expand on this paper's conclusions would likely require interviews with those who utilize public transportation more regularly, and should integrate public transportation into the methodology. Fourth, other demographic factors not presented to the interviewer may affect the results, and in fact the interviewer's own identity may affect the participants' willingness to respond candidly or fully to the questions of the study.

Implications for Further Research

Despite these limitations, the methodology tested here (using the individual as opposed to the tract as a means to determine motivating factors) should be expanded upon to find additional factors outside of the ones identified. For example, further research may well find that language, accessibility, and cultural barriers may lead to food

access decisions counter to the literature's suggestions. In addition, further exploration using this methodology may reveal a level of richness not accessed by the investigator in this paper as a result of the limited recruitment methods employed. It is the hope of this author that such research is conducted in future, to further ground and expand on these findings.

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