

Crossfire in the Kitchen: Race and Class Role Tensions in Service-Learning

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This study approaches service-learning through a critical dramatic perspective. Erving Goffman's concept of human interactions as staged performances combines with the structuration of race- and class-based power hierarchies to provide a theoretical framework for examining the interaction patterns between African-American college student volunteers and African-American clients at a faith-based community meal center. Employing an ethnographic method, the paper explores how intersectional identities foreground class differences in ways that fragment shared ethnicities. Observation of how volunteers and clients at the site react to each other's backstage activities (moments when actors depart from roles scripted as appropriate within the service-learning context) reveals how class-based tensions reveal systemic power imbalances that can influence the conduct and impact of service-learning.

Service-learning projects designed to promote racial equality and level class differences may ultimately (albeit unintentionally) lend support to embedded injustice and intolerance. As Butin (2010) puts the matter, "The very institutions that service-learning advocates are trying to storm, in other words, may drown them" (p.37). This essay investigates the power dynamics of a service-learning project that seemingly failed to fulfill its potential. By re-enacting roles, plots, and scenes that

reinforced hierarchies based on socioeconomic class, a service-learning project designed to break down class-based barriers may have fortified them instead. The roots and repercussions of this project's problems yield deeper insights about the conduct of service-learning pedagogy.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

SITE AND PROJECT PROFILE

The service-learning site, referenced herein by the pseudonym "Place of Plenty," is a meal distribution center serving three meals daily. The site operates year-round, including holidays, serving an average of 630 meals daily. The sponsoring organization, a local ecumenical group, also hosts a shelter for the homeless, a food pantry, a clothing distribution center, and a substance abuse rehabilitation facility. This extensive array of community services, combined with minimal resources, creates a chronic labor shortage. The organization claims on its website that ninety percent of its labor force consists of volunteers. The patrons for the duration of the service-learning project consisted almost entirely of African Americans, a point that assumes special significance for this analysis. Place of Plenty is located in a badly decayed urban area of a city with a population of approximately 230,000.

Place of Plenty was a new community partner for the university involved in this study. The educational setting is an urban, doctoral-granting, research intensive university of approximately 18,000 students located in the southeastern United States. The student volunteers selected their site from a list of prospective community partners. The course was a core requirement for all majors in communication studies, and it bore a course marker notifying students that it included a service-learning component. Upon successful completion, the course would be listed with a service-learning designation on the student's transcript. The topic of the course was community activism, and it was designed to apply theories of communication to pressing social problems, such as poverty, racism, and homelessness. All students were required to complete a minimum of twenty hours at a site. The class was divided into several groups, each assigned to whatever site the group members chose and the instructor approved from various options. The group whose experiences form the ethnographic basis of this paper consisted of five students: three African American females and two African American males. A few weeks into the service-learning project, only

one of the students remained active. In its debut as a community partner with this university, the volunteer group working at the site suffered an 80 percent attrition rate.

RATIONALE ROOTED IN AFROCENTRIC VALUES

The student service-learning group had eagerly anticipated their project. The site selection offered an opportunity to reach out to fellow African Americans in need, thereby implementing a communitarian ethic deeply rooted in African traditions. The principle of *Ujima*, defined as "collective work and responsibility" and honored as one of the seven principles of Kwanzaa known collectively as *Nguzo Saba*, recognizes the problems faced by any African Americans as the responsibility of the entire African American community (Johnson, 2001, p. 416). *Ujima* stresses the collective, cooperative responsibility to recognize social disadvantages and thereby to take ownership of actions designed to counteract them. Assuming such collective responsibility builds a sense of empowerment arising from the synergies of working alongside those who share one's cultural heritage (Belgrave et al., 2011). Johnson (2001) explicitly identifies service-learning as a way to implement *Ujima* in higher education: "Service learning programs that connect African American students by major with African American agencies in the African American community that could use their services would execute the principle of *Ujima*" (p. 418).

Martin and Martin (1985) note the significance that an ethic of indigenous caregiving plays in African American communities: "Even in earlier periods when the urban black population was much smaller, black caregiving was viewed as necessary to help blacks adapt to and survive" systemic racism and social disadvantages (p. 65). This observation also identifies a communitarian ethic of care as a counterpoise to the competitive individualism that can challenge the willingness of communities to coalesce so they can assist their members in need. Service-learning offers one way to restore the communal links that the zero-sum competitive mentality so common in capitalist societies threatens to fray (Schwartzman & Phelps, 2002).

The noble tradition of *Ujima* and its extension into an ethic of intra-cultural care sustained through service would seem to make a service-learning project focusing on African Americans an especially attractive and worthwhile endeavor for a group of African American students. The students were shocked and quickly disillusioned when, instead of the communal bond of *Ujima*, they encountered an institutional culture and African American clientele who were resistant and sometimes antagonistic to the service-learners' efforts.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS, METHODS, AND THEORETICAL GROUNDING

The sole student who completed the entire project posed a compelling set of researchable questions that she was still trying to process more than a year later. First, what factors could explain the high attri-

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tion of student volunteers? These students displayed motivation for the course and its service-learning component. They were not lazy, and they genuinely wanted to make a positive difference in the community. Their rapid alienation raises a second, related question. Why would a bond fail to develop between African American users of social services and African American student volunteers distributing those resources? In other words, what kept the rich ground of Ujima from developing a positive, caring relationship between the students and the clientele?

The answers to these questions emerge most clearly from close attention to the interpersonal relationships that developed at the site. Accessing the formation of these relationships requires direct exposure to the lived experience of the students *in vivo*, as they encountered the physical, attitudinal, and relational conditions at the site. The most appropriate method for generating such information is to derive it ethnographically, in this instance from the observations of a student engaged in the service-learning project. Unlike summative self-reports of service-learning that often reflect social biases favoring glowing testimonials of transformative experiences (Schwartzman & Henry, 2009), ethnography focuses on interpretively processing the experiences themselves. Through deep descriptions, ethnography delves into how the participants in service-learning engaged in the lived practice of the project. An ethnographic method enables naturalistic observation, placing experiences "in the context of the natural settings which give meaning and substance to their views" (Brewer, 2000, p. 36).

Rather than using service-learning to test an administrative structure for applied learning or to provide evidence for an education theory, ethnography focuses on how the experience has no teleology or predictable trajectory. Instead, the twists and turns of the project are faithfully reported according to the perspectives of those who experienced them. The result, as in this case, may not yield a neat closure and happy ending. Ethnography, however, recognizes and embraces the open texture of lived narratives whose plots may raise unsettled and unsettling questions. The result is, according to Goodall (2000), "the persuasive expression of interpreted cultural performances" (p. 83).

Implementation of ethnography in this essay invokes a larger theory known as dramaturgy, which approaches social practices as enacted performances that position social actors in roles (Goffman, 1959). Just as dramatic plots are driven by conflict, the interactions between the students, clients, and staff at the service-learning site generated tensions. Many of these tensions resulted from class hierarchies that confounded the formation of kinship based on shared heritage. The tensions were not resolved largely because they were experienced and approached episodically and not systemically, as troublesome individual incidents rather than indicators of entrenched divisions based on degrees of social privilege. Dramaturgy as a theory has limitations when dealing with such entrenched antagonisms. Although dramaturgy can identify the interaction patterns symptomatic of social structures, it fails to connect individual roles people assume with social forces that

distribute power. When people enact interpersonal roles, these interactions occur within the context of broader political or cultural norms that define what constitutes "proper" behavior. Dramaturgy, while offering a powerful descriptive resource, could be enriched by conjunction with theoretical tools that unpack the dynamics of power (Williams, 1986).

This essay ethnographically invokes a critical dramaturgy, juxtaposing first-person reflections from a student service-learner with analysis that connects these direct experiences to the structural components of relationships that sustain social privilege and hierarchy. Physical breaks (designated by asterisks) in the text represent the shift between those personal and theoretical perspectives.

Attention to structures that sustain and restrain power becomes necessary to address broader questions that connect the experiences at this service-learning site with larger social practices. In his theory of structuration, social theorist Anthony Giddens (1984) directs attention to the institutionalized practices that produce and preserve relations of power across time and space. Structuration concurs with dramaturgy's focus on interactional practices as the observable indicators of power and privilege. It adds a more thorough consideration of how the dramatic enactment of roles in a particular situation can provide a microcosmic view of how power relations get embedded in the fabric of society.

The fundamental root of many difficulties encountered in this project lies in intersectionality, or the multiple layers of identity that also can furnish multiple points for connection or oppression (hooks, 2000). Any component of intersectional identity can become more or less salient in particular situations. Intersectionality surfaces in the project under consideration because the student service-learners initially considered shared racial identity as sufficient to form the interpersonal bonds that could activate Ujima. Instead, class became more salient at Pantry of Plenty. The distance created by perceived class distinctions outweighed the shared self-identification as African Americans. The impact of class on interactions will be discussed more thoroughly in the following sections.

BACKSTAGE SIGNS OF CLASS PRIVILEGE

Using the analogy of a stage layout, Goffman (1959) calls attention to different types of human behaviors involved in impression management. Front stage behaviors consist of the publicly observable, often managed impressions that people present to each other. Front stage actions are, to varying degrees, strategically crafted to cast the actor in the light that she or he desires. Backstage behaviors are all the spontaneous, unintentional actions that can challenge or contradict the "official" actions in front stage behavior. Backstage behaviors violate the impressions conveyed by front stage actions. Because backstage actions are private and not crafted to impress an audience, they seem more truthful and genuine (Goffman, 1959, p. 112). For instance, a person's habits of dress and manners at home may give a truer indication of one's lifestyle than the same person's demeanor at a formal party.

Backstage behaviors at this service-learning site constitute seepage of cues that signify social privilege. These cues are analogous to so-called “leakage cues” identified by deception research. According to this line of research, nonverbal behaviors that indicate deceit can infiltrate or “leak through” the façade of truth a deceiver tries to maintain while lying (Ekman, 2009). The observed backstage behaviors operate analogously in a service-learning context. In these cases, backstage behaviors “leaked” cues that signified class differences. As Ekman (2009) observes, unintentionally leaked behaviors tend to be interpreted as more genuine than other behaviors, especially verbal claims, which can be easily rehearsed and manipulated. Backstage behaviors, even when apparently insignificant individually, carry disproportionately greater weight as genuine signs of social status. Because they are presumably unstaged, leaked behaviors can assume a degree of veracity that conventional performances of charitable duties lack. The following sections detail three sites of backstage leakage: parking, bringing and consuming food and beverages from outside the facility, and clothing.

TRANSPORTATION PRIVILEGES

Volunteers at Place of Plenty were given V.I.P. parking spots behind the building, closest to the kitchen. They were also near a bus stop where clients could view us as we drove in and out of the lot. John, the full-time head cook, always parked his car in these spots also. From day one, John was always obsessed with where we parked our cars. He continually asked, “Where did you park your car today? I hope directly beside the door because it’s safer. Every day you come here, Rule Number One: always park your car close to the door. Rule Number Two: lock your doors. These people, given the opportunity, will steal. You know what I mean.”

This didn’t square with my professor’s Rule Number One: No judgments in the service-learning environment.

John, the service-learners, and other volunteers were the only people allowed to park in these designated spots. Gayle, the director, did not park where the clients could see her. Instead, she parked on a secluded one-way street that clients did not use because it was not easily accessible to a bus stop.

My service-learning group drove basic American autos: Chrysler, General Motors, Ford. None of us thought of our cars as pretentious, but what impression was conveyed by the fact that we arrived in various cars? Not only did we have our own reliable transportation that we could use at will. We also had choices of whose vehicle to use when we carpooled to and from the site.

I drove a Chevy Cobalt — basic transportation by my middle-class standards. I didn’t view it as a luxury car, but some of the clients at the site viewed *any car* as a luxury.

When I arrived for breakfast duty before dawn one cold morning, one man huddled under his blue hoodie addressed me as he waited for breakfast service to begin.

“Is this your ride?”

“Yes,” I answered.

“It looks goood! I wish I had a car, so I didn’t have to walk or beg for a ride.” I paused, searched in vain for a suitable reply, and escaped through the kitchen entrance. I felt a vague sense of discomfort, a nagging sense of shame that I couldn’t quite identify or describe.

* * *

The automobile has long served as a tangible indicator of socioeconomic status in the United States. Possession of a car, regardless of the make or model, signifies not only an affiliation with the middle class (or higher), but also carries social privileges deeply tied to American values: geographic mobility, independence through not having to “bum a ride,” and autonomy to determine one’s own schedule of travel (Urry, 2004). Juxtaposing automobiles, multilayered signifiers of success, with the bus stop and with the waiting area for people who had walked to the facility created a site where different class indicators were bound to clash.

Goffman (1963) observes that boundaries of status, like physical boundaries, require adaptation and negotiation. In this case, spatial dynamics set up boundary conditions that were presented as existential facts: the parking situation simply is the way it is. Interrogating the implications of the setting reveals the power and class issues at stake. John occupied an ambiguous social position. As the head cook, yet he held a position of status and authority. He also was Hispanic, yet he positioned himself with the more well-to-do African American service-learners, warning them of risks to their property from the nefarious “others.” Choosing to affiliate more by class than by shared status as a marginalized non-White population, John’s willingness to put his own vehicle at risk certified his membership in the category of service “providers” rather than the “needy” clientele.

The parking lot also created an ambiguous setting for negotiating boundaries between social classes. The client’s comments to the student, narrated above, could have been interpreted as an indirect request for a ride. The rule of beneficence would instruct students to offer as much service as possible. What about offering transportation to one of the clients? What risks and rewards would attach to bridging the transportation gap between service-learners and patrons? These questions never seriously arise as long as the class differential remains firmly entrenched and trespassing across classes remains prohibited. With class distinctions solidly established, the cars provided a daily reminder of the freedom, mobility, and comfort attendant to class ascension.

DIETARY PRIVILEGES

Whenever I had to go to the service-learning site, I performed my morning ritual of stopping at Hardee’s, Bojangles’ Famous Chicken ‘n Biscuits, Starbucks, and other restaurants to eat before I started the physically demanding job of serving food. I needed my energy and my

strength to get through the day. Besides, I had to arrive at 6 a.m. for breakfast service. One mouthwatering biscuit and a large cup of coffee was my usual fare. Some days I was able to eat the biscuit while driving to the site. Other days, I had to bring the food in with me, and I ate it in the back entrance to limit the number of clients who saw me. But that concealment wasn't always effective.

Eying me scarfing down the day's biscuit, one client said, "Why didn't you bring me a biscuit from Bojangles'? I love Bojangles' when I can get someone to buy me something!"

"Sorry!" I mumbled through the biscuit crumbs. John, the head cook, interrupted the conversation. "Leave her alone while she eats! She doesn't need you making her feel bad for not bringing you any food."

This encounter with the client halted me from bringing food onto the site. The client's comment pointed directly to the contrast between my food choices and the menu the patrons of Place of Plenty had to accept.

I stopped bringing in food, but I continued to bring in cups of coffee. I didn't think there was a problem with that.

The one souvenir that remained from my morning breakfast ritual was the drink cup from the restaurant. The red and yellow Bojangles' coffee cup had no special significance for me. At least no more than the Hardee's and Starbucks cups that we sipped from as we staffed the food line.

Others noticed the branded coffee cups more than I did.

In the food line, a woman wearing a yellow crochet hat remarked, "Man, I wish I could drink coffee whenever I wanted and not have to stand in this line all day for some coffee."

My branded coffee cup visibly reminded her of my access to choices she did not have.

* * *

The mere presence of food and drink from beyond Place of Plenty, regardless of whether it was consumed, introduced an incursion of the students' backstage world of dietary choices into an environment of limited options. Place of Plenty becomes an ironic moniker referencing a locale that issued identification tags to clients as a way to track access, offered no choices beyond what was available on the food line, and strictly enforced limits on portions. By leaving their coffee cups visible, the service-learners juxtaposed tokens of their social privilege with the restricted options faced by the patrons. The changing brands on the cups reminded onlookers of the wide array of selections the student enjoyed.

Importation of food from outside gave a tangible indication of class hierarchies. These vestiges of privilege served as reminders of a lifestyle with more dietary options and fewer externally imposed dietary constraints. The portability of the food and drinks demonstrated control over access that the Place of Plenty patrons did not enjoy. The students

could stop at a convenient drive-through window or takeout counter, customize their order, and decide where to consume their purchase. The clientele at the site had to travel where the food was served, consume it on site (with one exception to be discussed later), conform to the choices they were offered, and eat only within a limited window of a few hours. Many clients would be waiting outside for an hour or more before service began, even in the pre-dawn darkness before breakfast or in inclement weather. They had to adapt to the facility's schedule and to the availability of transportation.

APRONS AND AUTHENTICITY

Each shift of food service began with the ritual of donning the plain white, institutional-style apron. Every day it was mandatory that I wore a white apron provided by the kitchen staff. John, the head cook, insisted that I wear an apron to keep my clothes clean.

"Never forget your apron. We don't want to be responsible for your clothes being stained," John said.

I responded, "I don't think I need an apron because my jeans and t-shirt can easily be washed, and I'm not worried about stains."

After the shift was over, I hung my apron on the coat rack located at the back entrance. Even the soiled aprons were reserved a special storage area, while the patrons of the food line carried their coats or draped them over their chairs when not wearing them. Shorn of my apron, I then walked out the back door where clients would be standing in the parking lot already waiting for the next meal. Officially off duty, now I wasn't cast in the role of server or helper. Absent the institutional costume of the apron and my staged position of provider in the food line, I became a visibly better dressed woman than the African Americans waiting for food. Besides, I was heading *away* from the food that they could not yet access.

"Are you leaving now?"

"Yes, I am!" I answered.

"Where are you going once you leave here?"

"I'm going home." Little did I realize my automatic response amplified my secure housing status compared to many in the food line.

"Well, that's nice! I have about six hours before I can go back to the shelter for check-in. I'll see you next time." The remark had no malice, but it placed our starkly different social situations in bold relief.

"I'll see you later," I said, oblivious to the fact that I simply assumed this African American would reprise his role as a hungry, underprivileged man when I returned for the next shift.

* * *

Aside from their practical role in protecting clothing, the aprons also had the potential to act in some degree as class equalizers. Clad in aprons that covered their entire torso, the student volunteers might have

been able to shrink the status gap between themselves and the clientele. The aprons could mask the status indicators lurking beneath, conveying a classless uniformity much like military uniforms. Those uniforms, however, effectively replace rather than simply obscure sartorial signs of socioeconomic class. The regular sights of student volunteers before and after they donned their aprons reinforced the signal that their genuine garb was tied to a wealthier demographic than the clientele. The act of putting on an apron in itself indicated that the volunteers wore clothing worthy of protection. Goffman (1986/1963) notes that visible indicators of prestige or of stigma play an especially important role in assigning status and identity. These markers structure future interactions, since they — accurately or not — fuel predictions about how to treat and react to others.

Although they served a practical purpose, the aprons formed part of what Goffman (1959) labels the “front,” defined as that part of the individual’s performance which regularly functions in a general and fixed fashion to define the situation for those who observe the performance. Front, then, is the expressive equipment of a standard kind intentionally or unwittingly employed by the individual during his [sic] performance. (p.22)

Goffman’s terminology is instructive and nuanced. The aprons furnished the physical front of the volunteers, in effect converting the visible portion of each volunteer in the food line to a signifier of “server.” The fact that this indicator of a role was later visibly set aside also lent the aprons an air of artifice. These fronts were not fixed, but rather detachable accoutrements to a performance. The aprons temporarily masked the outfits the students voluntarily wore. Removal of the aprons revealed more permanent signs of social privilege: brand-name clothing and reminders of college affiliation unattainable to the people awaiting food service. In this sense, the volunteers unwittingly put up a front when they put on their aprons.

The clothing that the aprons protected often signified class-based privilege even when it carried no designer designation. The service-learners often “branded” themselves by wearing clothing and accessories emblazoned with the name or logo of their university. Not only did the university attire signify wealth and social mobility compared to the clientele, but it also distanced the students from the African American patrons. Previous student volunteers had come from nearby historically black institutions (HBCUs). This service-learning group, however, arrived from a university that was predominately white and with a higher tuition than the HBCUs. The disparity accentuated the rift between the students and other African Americans.

* * *

As we began setting up for food service, one man harshly called out to a member of our service-learning group. The man was wearing a hoodie bearing the logo of a local HBCU.

“Hey, what you don’t like ‘bout the Eagles?” The Eagles were the mascot for the HBCU. The man’s tone was aggressive, making me glad we arrived as a group.

Bernie, the student, said, “I like the Eagles.”

“If you like the Eagles, why you wear a sweatshirt that doesn’t have an eagle on it?”

“I’m wearing the sweatshirt from my university,” Bernie replied.

“Why you not supporting Central or any other HBCUs? Please, correct me if I’m wrong, but your university is predominately Caucasian.” At first his rather formal vocabulary surprised me. On second thought, I questioned my assumption that the clientele had less education than we did.

Al — the dishwasher, enforcer, and conflict resolver — suddenly interceded. “Not everyone has to go to Central or any HBCU. You didn’t even go to any college, and you’re complaining because Bernie’s college isn’t an HBCU.”

I appreciated Al’s attempt to mediate, but to the man waiting for food, the lines of loyalty had been drawn.

ENACTING FAMILIAR SOCIAL SCRIPTS

The staging of the food service structured interactions according to a familiar, stereotypical script. This implicit but embedded social narrative, summarized bluntly by bell hooks (2000), presumes that “the journeys of the privileged have come to constitute the norm ‘white’ colonizer and/or immigrant experience, whereas the norm for black people continues to be slavery” (p. 90). The stinging accuracy of this script becomes apparent in depictions of many public service or aid activities that feature whites typecast as benefactors and darker-skinned people typecast as needy, passive victims. Although such role assignment is deeply problematic, its enactment occurs routinely when racial and class hierarchies intersect. When discrepant classes with a shared ethnicity interact, the tensions of intersectionality can flare.

* * *

When Caucasian volunteers staffed Place of Plenty, the African American clients were far more receptive to them than to us, who were supposedly their brothers and sisters.

“Please,” “thank you,” and other polite comments flowed profusely from the clients’ mouths when White volunteers were serving them food. “I’d love any piece of bread that you give me. Thank you and have a nice day!”

When interacting with White volunteers, African American patrons did not want to be seen reinforcing stereotypes that they were ill-mannered. An unspoken code among African Americans instructs us that we should not act out in front of company (i.e., White people) because we do not want to be perceived negatively.

When my group served food, many clients forgot their manners. There was no “please” or “thank you.” The clientele did not display the same gratitude when we rendered the same services as the White volunteers. These clients expected us to fulfill their every demand.

“Gimme me another slice of bread!”

“Gimme me another piece of meat!”

“Gimme me some more sugar!”

When we did not obey their commands, they halted the line and did not move until we gave in. The clients never challenged the authority of White volunteers. When the line stopped, the clients would stare down a service-learner until their demands were met. Al, the Caucasian dishwasher and self-designated enforcer, was not always nearby to help us with the more difficult clients. Al refused to comply with their demands. He warned them: “If you can’t follow directions and respect the servers, you’ll lose your food privileges.”

Something struck me as strange about referring to a food distribution line as a privilege.

* * *

The rules of food distribution placed the African American service-learners in a difficult position. The aggressive demands for more food, although delivered harshly, reflect a degree of presumed complicity with ethnic kin. Whereas any additional requests to the White servers would deepen the disparity between benefactor and “needy” recipients, African American servers might be more likely to circumvent the system to help their brethren. The confrontational demands of the patrons contain a hint of Ujima, an invocation to the African American service-learners to fulfill an obligation for communal aid that was not incumbent on Whites who did not share such kinship. The visit of a high-status White man in the role of server triggered an exaggerated re-enactment of gratitude for White beneficence. Even if the performance of the server and the clientele were pure artifice, the front stage actions legitimized racial and class hierarchies by providing images that conformed to the standard script. A personal narrative re-creates the scene.

* * *

The White Savior came in on a Wednesday morning.

I arrived at 6:00 that morning for breakfast duty, as usual. This day was different. Place of Plenty was abuzz with preparations. A rich, important man was coming, so everything had to be spotless. (I never discovered exactly who this important man was or what he did for a living.) As he arrived, his chauffeur escorted him in. His car was parked illegally in the volunteer parking lot. The Caucasian celebrity arrived with an entourage of camera crew, photographers, and handlers to show the public he cared. I was pushed out of the way as the picture was snapped of him helping the “poor people.”

One regular client at the buffet line gushed, “Thank you, Mister!” He dropped to his knees to worship the man who took a total of twenty minutes out of his busy schedule to win points to show how he cared for the poor. Continuously, the African American clients gratefully received their food, honoring the man who never reappeared after his twenty-minute photo op. Meanwhile, I had been working for four hours already and had endured the standard demands and challenges.

ANTAGONISTIC INTERPERSONAL DYNAMICS

The following sections describe and critically examine the interpersonal dynamics at the site. Several antagonistic relationships became interwoven in a tension-filled atmosphere: staff versus clientele, service-learners versus clientele, and internecine struggles among the clients.

FOOD GUARDIANS OR FOOD PROVIDERS?

The portions we distributed were always small, and the clients voiced concern about this every day. Before service started, Al (the dishwasher) or John (the head cook) always reminded the servers to remember the portion sizes for breakfast.

“One piece of meat, one ladle of oatmeal or grits, one slice of bread, and half a cup of coffee. The most important thing is the sugar rule: only one packet of sugar for every cup of coffee. Nothing more than this and then we send them on their way.”

The morning rules were easy to recite, but hard to uphold when interacting with the clientele. It was tough to look into people’s hungry eyes and know that some of them hadn’t eaten in days. Many clients kept saying the same thing: “Can I have...?” Another spoonful of oatmeal, an extra ladle of grits, another piece of meat, a bigger portion of meat—more of whatever we were serving. There was a battle between our morality and the rules at Place of Plenty. It seemed wrong to withhold food from people who needed it, and it was also wrong to break the rules of the site. The clients always appeared to need more, and we were not allowed to fulfill that need. This restriction on our ability to help was depressing, and sometimes we felt we had to break the rules. Then we faced an awkward choice: which clients would receive more food?

A few clients were upset with the rules and decided to rebel by taking second and third servings. These clients would come through the line one time and then change their outfit and no one would notice. One man we nicknamed “Red Toboggan” was infamous. The first time through the line he would wear his customary red toboggan. Then about fifteen minutes later, he would come back through the line without the toboggan and wearing a different shirt. This behavior continued for about three visits until the servers noticed.

* * *

The buffet line in effect became a boundary line. The servers, shielded from the food by aprons, accompanied by remnants of drinks unavailable to the patrons, denying requests for additional or customized servings, occupied the high status side of the line. On the other side of the line were the clientele: sometimes rebelling against or circumventing rules they believed were unfair, always cast in the role of needy recipients.

The daily incantation of portion limitations enacts structuration by requiring "actions to be constrained by these shared abstractions of social structure" (Orlikowski & Robey, 1991, p. 147). The system of food rules, like the practices of parking, operate as directives that reinforce the very class hierarchies that food aid and other social services are designed to erode. These operational structures guide conduct on two levels (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Giddens, 1984). As external, dehistoricized rules, they define norms of proper behavior (much like one "minds one's manners" simply because that is what a civilized person does). As internal guides for personal conduct, they create motivations to self-regulate behavior because the service-learner does not want to be insubordinate. The rules in this case became problematic because they directly conflicted with the ethical norms espoused in the service-learning class: maximize care and assist those in need. This recasting of service providers into service deprivors could partially explain the high attrition rate among the students. The more altruistic a student's motives for serving at Place of Plenty, the more problematic the enforced limitations became.

FOOD FIGHT FRIDAYS

On Fridays, two food lines were set up: the customary one for the hot meal served to each person, and a second line that was for food that could be taken away. I wondered how those who selected the perishable food could store it. Take-home food required access to a refrigerator if the food were to remain fresh more than a few hours. The distribution of leftover food avoided waste at Place of Plenty, but how likely was it that the food could be put to good use once it left the facility?

The hot meal line was rigidly organized, with the standard sequence of portion-protected foods allocated to each passing plate and palate. The orderly ritual resembled many institutional cafeteria lines.

Not so for the take-out line, which hardly qualified as a line at all. There was chaos, pushing, and people insulting each other because they wanted to claim their food. The scene of Food Fight Fridays reminded me of news reports showing hungry people in third world countries pushing and shoving as they mobbed foreign aid trucks delivering food.

The take-out area turned ugly as the shouting and shoving escalated. Amidst the chaos, our buffet line stopped serving. People seated at the tables stopped eating. All eyes in the dining room turned to the take-out food line. People were pushing each other and angry over not

having enough food to take with them. Clients were grabbing as much of everything as they could carry and did not leave anything else for others behind them.

Al, the full-time dishwasher, was watching through the window above the sink. He quickly left his post washing dishes, grabbed his broom, and ran to the chaotic scene. Using his broomstick as a giant gavel, he banged on the table with authority.

Al yelled, "Stop all this foolishness! There are children and the student servers in this room who are seeing you act like this. The images that people see of you make them think that we all act like animals."

The pandemonium subsided. Punishment for the food fight was that the second food line closed because the proper security was not available to keep order. Al and his broomstick had other obligations and could not break up the fights all the time.

This cycle of setting up the take-out line, the mad scramble to grab as much food as possible, the shouting and scuffles, the staff intervention, and finally the shutdown of the second line became the standard script for Friday food service.

* * *

The staging associated with Food Fight Fridays amplified class tensions on several levels. The lack of any organized distribution system transformed the patrons from cafeteria diners to food hoarders. The availability of uncontrolled portions of random foods (whatever was kitchen surplus for the week) was framed differently by the different actors. From the side of management and kitchen staff, the take-out line was framed as an act of generosity, a fringe benefit on Fridays to those who might need additional food.

Al's characterization of the clientele as "animals" identified another logical role of the patrons under the circumstances. The staging of the distribution itself could be framed as analogous to dumping food and leaving it for animals to devour. The setting lent itself to this less flattering attribution: food strewn willy-nilly without the sequenced serving or portion guardianship of the standard buffet line. By providing uncontrolled access to scarce resources, Place of Plenty inadvertently staged a scene for zero-sum conflict. The take-out line pitted patrons against each other, since each person's access to food became more limited with each item taken by someone else. Conditions of scarcity can reduce chances for a group's cohesiveness as each person sees the other as a limit on one's own resources. The more acute scarcity becomes, the more it can generate violent conflicts (Gendron & Hoffman, 2009). A zero-sum mentality escalates conflict as each person's cohorts become recast as potential sources of personal deprivation.

Al's admonition that eased the conflict contains subtle but significant signs of class dynamics. Enconced at his dishwashing station, Al at first witnessed Food Fight Friday squarely within the confines of the kitchen. From this space reserved only for staff and volunteer labor, his

role was defined as a staff member and enforced by his physical separation that also marked a difference in status from the clientele. As he crossed the boundary that sequestered staff from clients, he blurred the border that differentiated him from those in the dining space. Different physical enclosures call for different styles of performance (Goffman, 1963), as demonstrated in Al's language use. Beginning by labeling the combatants foolish, he proceeded to shame them into proper behavior. He then suddenly shifted away from an us-them terminology — addressing the offenders as “you” — to the first person plural “we,” linguistically including himself as one of those who “act like animals.” While this shift could be dismissed as an accidental verbal lapse, it illustrates a reference to kinship starkly opposed to the antagonistic tones he uttered within the kitchen's borders.

PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

The conventional wisdom of “know the service-learning site” may require augmentation to cope with the sorts of tensions that arise from institutionalized class distinctions. Even the most detailed factual knowledge about a site may not translate into adaptive behaviors. Knowing the service-learning site may require deeper immersion in the dynamics of interpersonal encounters on site. This deeper knowledge can arise from role-playing simulations that require students to address situations that involve conflict or ambiguity. One major pedagogical advantage of service-learning is its capacity to prepare students to cope with uncertainties and under-determined outcomes. This advantage can be maximized only if students have some experience with such situations in safe, low-stakes activities before embarking on a service assignment. Rehearsing potential scenarios the student could encounter encourages service-learners to become more mindful of how they interact with others.

Students need to be emotionally as well as cognitively prepared for processing their service-learning experiences. Alongside the gratification from helping others, student volunteers also may witness or participate in the denial of services to some clientele. Some students may become discouraged and withdraw from participating if the service-learning site fails to meet their altruistic expectations. Before working on site, students should confront the prospect that available resources might not suffice to meet all clients' needs. On a theoretical level, readings such as Henri Barbusse's (1918/2008) short story “The Eleventh” provide a first-person perspective on the emotional pain caused by turning away people in need. After reading the story, students could discuss how they would cope when face-to-face with individuals they could not help. On a more concrete level, service-learners who had previously volunteered at a site could discuss the tensions and concerns of their experience, thereby enabling the next wave of service-learners to anticipate these challenges. To maximize candor, such discussions might best be conducted solely among the students without an instruc-

tor present. While it is common for peers to orient new service-learners to their duties, far more attention could be devoted to the prospect of not executing those duties as the students had anticipated.

The most direct way students could prepare for the racial, class, and interpersonal conflicts at a site would be to encounter them on site from multiple perspectives. To understand the perspective of service-learners, prospective participants could shadow students who currently serve at the site. In addition to providing training for specific tasks, shadowing exposes observers to the interpersonal dynamics that operate at the site. Shadowing furnishes a barometer of the interactive climate among the organization's staff, service-learners, and clientele.

A more ambitious diagnosis of conflicts and convergences could directly probe the perspectives of the clientele. Students could learn proper interview techniques by conducting detailed interviews or focus groups with an organization's clientele to determine their perceptions of the power relationships operant at the site. If such direct interactions prove impractical or might place students at risk, indirect observations of power dynamics could proceed from reviewing audio or video footage. Reviewing a record of a problematic situation by actually observing how it unfolded could convert a negative experience into a learning opportunity. Such observations have the further advantage of enabling better self-monitoring so students can recognize ways to avoid flash-points that cause tempers to flare and feelings to be hurt. Any form of detailed observation offers the opportunity to instruct students in taking proper field notes and communicating rich descriptions. In class meetings, students could directly compare perceptions of service-learners (themselves and their classmates) with those recorded by students who focused on getting feedback from the clientele. When the analysis of a site is fully triangulated by adding input from deep engagement with organizational staff (via interviews, etc.), areas of potential conflict as well as convergence can be addressed.

Students also could use an extension of ever-popular “selfies” (self-portraits, usually via a tablet or mobile device camera) as ways to document and reflect on the emotional aspects of their experiences. As soon as possible after a problematic experience, the student could make a brief video recording of her reaction to the situation. These documented experiences could serve as focal points for personal or class-wide reflection. Students could probe why they reacted the way they did, what triggered the reaction, what the consequences of the reaction were, and how they could adjust their reactions in the future. This kind of exercise might reduce attrition, since unaddressed frustrations or disappointments can accumulate and eventually alienate students from service-learning.

As for assignments, the experiences at Place of Plenty point to the need for reflective practices to extend beyond reporting and engage with issues of power and resource maldistribution. Critical reflection on the systemic roots of observable class differences can energize service-learning as an engine for social change. This iteration of reflection con-

trasts with the more passive practice of descriptive journal entries that report social practices without interrogating their roots in class hierarchies. Ethnography initiates self-reflection that can expand to include reflections on the social structures an individual's actions reproduce. Pine (2008) suggests, "Perhaps one way for students to both practice academic literacies and work toward 'critical consciousness' in service learning writing courses is to conduct ethnographic research of their community service experience" (p. 52). Engagement with the deep social structures that inform everyday practices at the site requires more than a narrative that simply details what each student did. In contrast to more detached journalistic reports, ethnographies can acquire a critical edge by juxtaposing the personal with the structural. Critical ethnography, therefore, melds personal perspective with structural critique.

Rosenberger (2000) articulates need to move past simply re-enacting the same service assignments that address the symptoms of social inequalities without inquiring into the structures that perpetuate them.

I propose that unless we who teach and participate in service learning are willing to view reality as dynamic and mutually created and to analyze the structural inequities that create unjust and oppressive conditions, we risk providing what Freire called 'false generosity' — acts of service that simply perpetuate the status quo and thus preserve the need for service. (p. 52)

Service-learning sites such as Place of Plenty perform vital social services that fulfill genuine needs. At the same time, students must develop greater awareness of food distribution and meal service centers (and many other service providers) as treatments for symptoms of larger social inequities.

CONCLUSION

Joi Nathan (2009) expresses concern that socially privileged, college-educated African Americans could become less likely to extend a helping hand to the underprivileged. Better educated, upwardly mobile African Americans may subscribe more to an ethic of self-determinism whereby they "may not seem very effective or overly ambitious in their political challenges and confrontations on behalf of non-elite blacks" (p. 45). Nathan (2009) chronicles a contraction of the sphere of caring among many young African Americans, a materialist self-centeredness she hears celebrated by a wide swath of hip-hop music culture. The ethic of *Ujima* can generate communal care among African Americans only to the extent that class distinctions do not fragment the sense of kinship and mutual obligation that drives community-building. The experiences at Place of Plenty show that foregrounding class hierarchies can inhibit a communitarian spirit.

Students also may need to confront the uncomfortable fact that poverty and undernourishment are consequences of policy decisions that consistently marginalize underprivileged classes. Legislative developments in the state where Place of Plenty is located furnish convenient cases. In the first year after the 2012 elections, the state legislature:

- cut maximum weekly unemployment benefits by 35 percent;
- reduced the maximum weeks of unemployment benefits from 26 weeks to 12-20;
- restricted eligibility for unemployment benefits;
- approved requiring drug tests as a condition of eligibility for public welfare programs (Brown, 2013; Yaccino, 2013).

Such policies underscore the need to accompany episodic service-learning experiences with critical awareness and willingness to engage in "ongoing constructive confrontation with class politics in the United States" (hooks, 2000, p. 148).